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OUT





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It wasn't all that long ago that I was talking up Arkane in the context of *Dishonored 2* and its long wait for recognition. The connecting threads between the studio's supernatural stealth series and its upcoming sci-fi reboot are many, but the one that is standing out to me at the moment is worldbuilding.

Arkane has proven itself to be particularly adept in this field, creating a context and environment for its stories that feels lived in, organic and full of history. In the case of *Dishonored* it's a history of class divisions, and a world torn apart by the power politics of the elites. The story of this place is written in the posters on the exposed brick walls, in the puddles on the street, the rubbish piling up in corners and the scars on the faces of its tortured population.

In *Prey* things seem to be shaping up in a similar fashion. This time, though, you can see the changing face of the world around you in the decor, the fonts on the signage and the decay. This is a more intimate form of storytelling for Arkane, more enclosed and more mysterious too. *Prey* gives you a sense of a world that could turn on its head at any moment, of a threat felt but not seen (whereas *you* were that threat in *Dishonored*).

I still get the sense that Arkane is a developer just warming up its muscles though, building towards something bigger. Perhaps that is *Prey*. Perhaps that's whatever comes next. Either way I continue to be enraptured by this developer.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR






x 185

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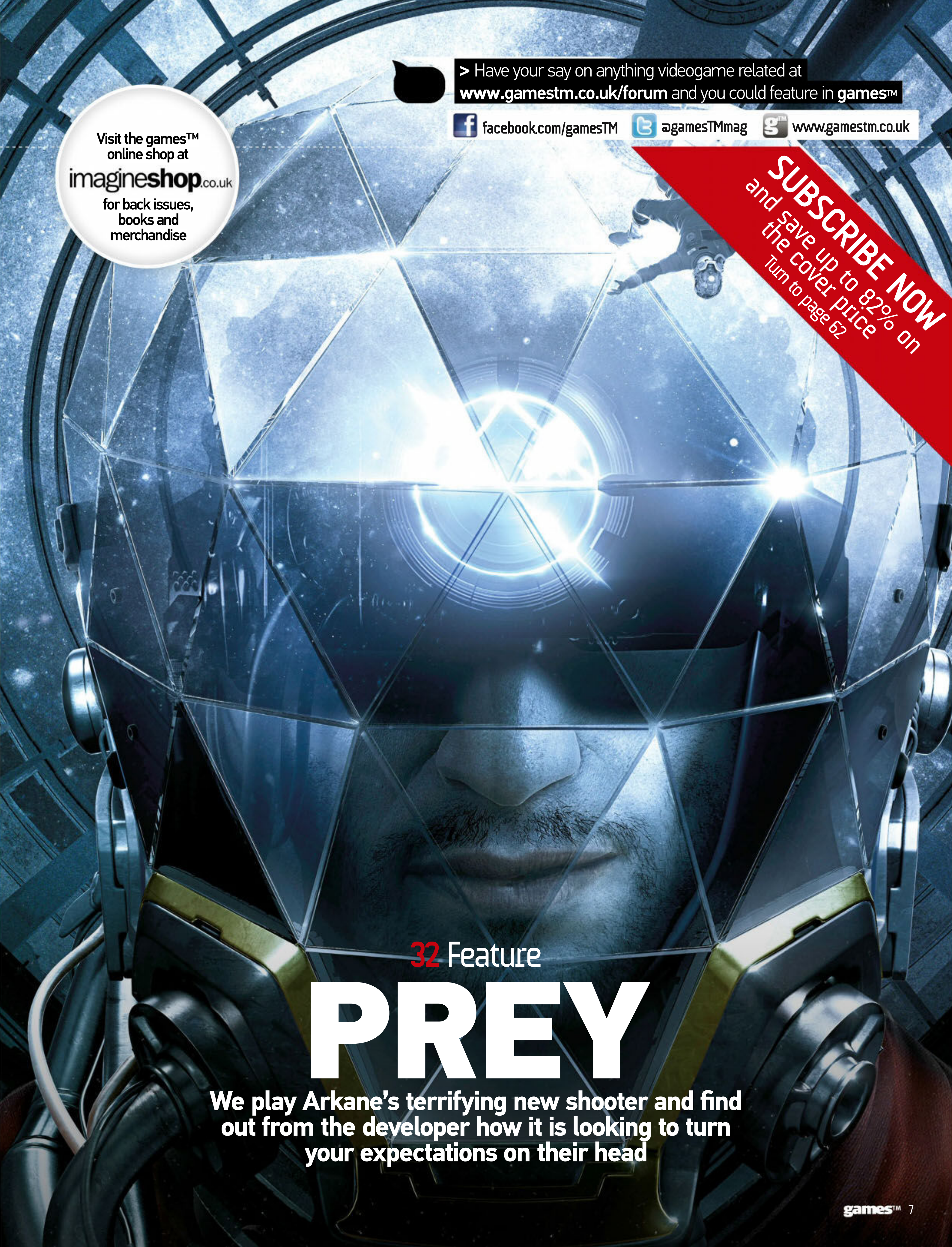
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PREY
We play Arkane's terrifying new shooter and find out from the developer how it is looking to turn your expectations on their head

ACCESS ALL AREAS

Xbox launches its own 'Netflix for gaming'

→ With Xbox Game Pass Microsoft is merging the best of EA Access and PlayStation Now, but is this the future of how we consume games?

For years Microsoft has been telling us that digital distribution is the future of media and with the reveal and rollout of Xbox Game Pass, we can pretty confidently now call it the present. This is not the first subscription program for gaming to have been announced and it is highly unlikely to be the last, but it may well be the best we've seen to date. What makes us say that? Because Microsoft has smartly listened to everything subscribers have been saying about other services out there and built something that addresses the number one complaints.

"Our fans cited that the right balance of selection, quality, and value are key factors when considering game subscription services," says Xbox Game Pass director of marketing Parimal Deshpande as we got a little more insight into the company's way of thinking. "Xbox Game Pass gives you unlimited access to a catalogue of more than 100 Xbox One and Xbox 360 backward compatible games for Xbox One. Xbox Game Pass will add new games to its catalogue every month, which means you will always find something fresh and exciting to play. Fans also called out streaming issues due to

> "Fans called out streaming issues due to intermittent internet connectivity as the top pain point for game streaming services"



Inset Something like Game Pass is a great way to experience titles like the *Gears Of War: Ultimate Edition* where you may have already played and enjoyed *GOW* on Xbox 360, but fancy taking a look at the remastered experience.



DATA STREAM → SONY REPORTS THAT HORIZON IS ITS BIGGEST NEW IP LAUNCH ON THE PS4 TO DATE

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Below Game Pass will include Xbox One and Xbox 360 titles so expect to see its library bolstered by plenty of classics from the last generation. *Fable III* is one of many making the launch.







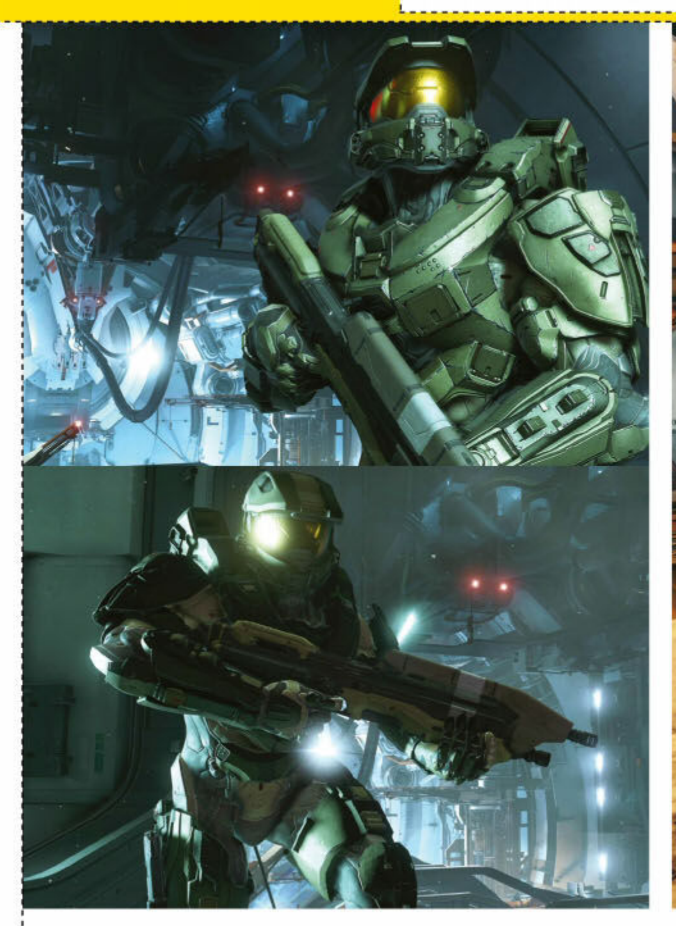
intermittent internet connectivity as the top pain point for game streaming services, which is why with Xbox Game Pass, you can download and experience games in their full fidelity and native resolution."

While Deshpande wouldn't be drawn on comparisons with PS Now or EA Access there's nothing stopping us from doing it, so here we go. While PS Now currently costs £12.99 a month for unlimited access to its catalogue of over 300 PS3 games, Game Pass costs £7.99 a month for unlimited access to over 100 Xbox One and Xbox 360 games. So, Xbox gamers are getting a smaller selection, but a more current one and at a lower monthly cost. What's more, titles are downloaded rather than streamed over the internet meaning they can be played offline. EA Access shares more similarities although it is obviously restricted to just EA titles and costs less as a result. And there are some other perks.

"If you love an Xbox One title in the Xbox Game Pass catalogue, you can buy it and instantly save 20 per cent off the price of the game, as well as an additional 10 per cent off related game add-ons, with your Xbox Game Pass subscription," explains


UBISOFT MASSIVE IS WORKING ON A TRIPLE-A GAME BASED ON THE AVATAR FRANCHISE







Above Launching the service with *Halo 5: Guardians* alone is a strong opening bid for Xbox Game Pass, giving more gamers the opportunity to play one of Xbox One's pillar titles and get involved with the still bustling online community.

Deshpande "And for our Xbox Live Gold members, they will have exclusive access to Xbox Game Pass before anyone else when the program launches to the broader Xbox community later this spring."

Importantly and rather smartly you don't need an Xbox Live Gold subscription in order to enjoy the benefits of Xbox Game Pass, other than online multiplayer functionality (which we imagine would apply to any games on the catalogue that requires an online connection to play). We know that *Halo 5: Guardians*, *Payday 2*, *NBA 2K16* and *SoulCalibur II* will be among the launch titles with further games rotating in an out of the service over time. "We want to provide our fans with a curated list of great games from Microsoft Studios – including 343 Industries, The Coalition and Rare – and top industry publishers," adds Deshpande. "Games will be selected based on a range of criteria, including genre, quality, rating and more. Our goal is to give our fans great games of every fashion, from triple-A to ID@Xbox, and from hits to hidden gems." Of the publishers confirmed to be working with Xbox on the program EA, Activision and Ubisoft stand as notable exceptions with EA's absence being self-explanatory. The *Call Of Duty* and *Assassin's Creed* series alone would be massive gets for such a service in the future, so may perhaps be targets for when the service has established itself. We'll need to wait and see on that front.

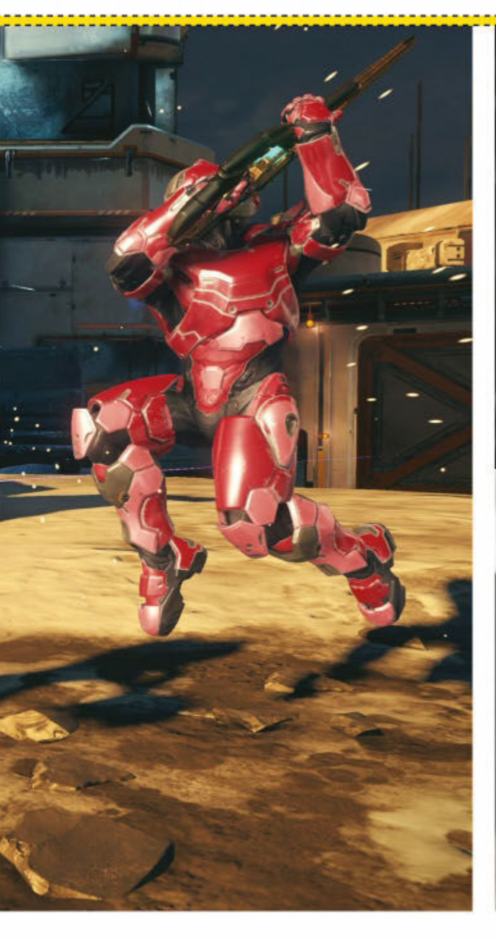
> "We definitely see Xbox Game Pass as another way for us to provide more choice to gamers, with value being top of mind"

We wanted a little more info on how games would rotate on the service so we asked Deshpande to tell us how it would be handled and what forewarning players might get. "We're always looking for ways to give our fans choice with the ability to discover new games each month," he assured us. "This means that we continuously re-evaluate the titles in the catalogue based on the needs of our fans. With the Leaving Soon section, you can see which games will be rotating out of Xbox Game Pass. If you love a game currently in the catalogue, you can buy it and instantly save 20 percent off the price of the game, as well as an additional 10 percent off related game add-ons, with your Xbox Game Pass subscription."

Xbox is, however, looking for feedback and suggestions of titles to add as the service launches and expands over the coming months. "While we do not have a formal voting system for titles and Xbox Game Pass, we're always interested to hear your thoughts on all things Xbox, so we can work to bring you the games and experiences you want most," Deshpande informs us. "Fans can keep the feedback coming by visiting www.xbox.uservoice.com." Although requests to have *Halo Wars 2* added to the selection may be a little premature, as newly released titles will appear on Game Pass eventually, but are unlikely to be made available at launch via the service, which is understandable.

What this creates is a kind of cinematic release versus rental/streaming dynamic, not unlike watching movies via Netflix versus catching them on release day at a cinema. So what of the Netflix comparison? Game Pass is about downloading rather than streaming, which really suits the medium of gaming better, but does the comparison hold beyond that?

DATA STREAM → THE NINTENDO SWITCH IS THE COMPANY'S FASTEST SELLING CONSOLE IN NORTH AMERICA



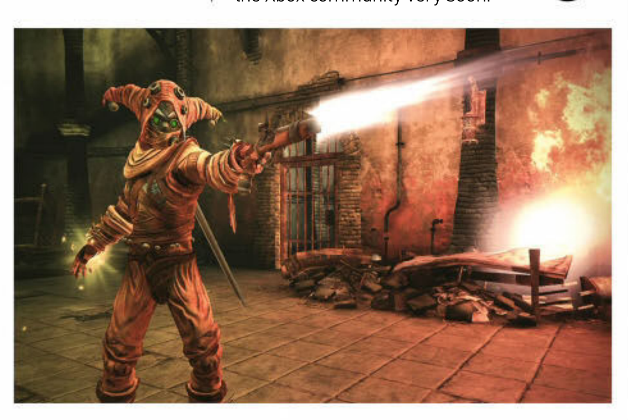




"I think there are always comparisons to extremely popular subscription services like Netflix – a long-standing Xbox partner – when a new type of service is launched," admits Deshpande. "There are certainly differences between the services in terms of content being offered; we're focused on offering a choice of games. Also, all games in the Xbox Game Pass catalogue will be downloaded to your Xbox One. This means continuous, full-fidelity gameplay without streaming. We know that this has been something the gaming community values in order to provide an enjoyable and seamless experience."

So, is this the future of gaming that Microsoft has been promising all of these years? Certainly it's another step that cements digital distribution and downloads as the mainstay of the Xbox One. However, the Xbox team seems to be approaching it more as another spoke in the wheel of opening up gaming to a broader audience and to suit the way you want to play. "We definitely see Xbox Game Pass as another way for us to provide more choice to gamers, with value being top of mind," Deshpande tells us. "When you look at what we've been doing across the Xbox brand: from offering more ways to play across devices through Xbox Play Anywhere and gaming on Windows 10, to bringing games across generations via Xbox One backward compatibility, and then constantly listening to fan feedback by adding more features to Xbox Live – it really comes down to giving fans more ways to play. We're really excited to get feedback from those in the Xbox Inside Program with this alpha preview and limited test catalogue, and then when the program becomes fully available for the Xbox community very soon!"

Above While many will balk at the prospect of another subscription payment for Xbox on top of Gold, the price point of £7.99 a month matches well with Netflix and actually makes it seem relatively affordable for what it's offering.



What's it up against?

→ A closer look at the subscription services Xbox Game Pass has been looking to emulate and improve upon

PLAYSTATION NOW



Sony's subscription service is an interesting collection of compromises that offers a pretty forward thinking service, but not necessarily the one that the majority of PS4 owners are interested in backing. Streaming PS3 games to PS4, PS Vita, PlayStation TV, PC and some smart TVs, some consider the service to be charging for backwards compatibility, which doesn't really do it any justice. It will, however, we scaling back its compatibility soon as all but PS4 and PC streaming will be cut from PS Now by August 2017. Could this be a streamlining measure before the introduction of PS4 titles to the service to match Xbox Game Pass? We're hoping that might be the case. The ability to play on different devices and have your save game jump from one to another was a nice feature.

EA ACCESS



EA's subs service is probably much closer to the model that Xbox is looking to emulate although EA is in a position to treat this even more like a premium service whereas Microsoft already has Xbox Live Gold and doesn't want to step on its toes. The EA Access Vault available exclusively on Xbox One offers a range of EA titles, some of them often quite recent releases, for unlimited play. On top of that you can also get earlier access to new releases if you pre-order them through Access and there are sometimes special beta tests before launch. Much like Game Pass you get a discount on EA games you decide to purchase in full. In EA's case it's 10 per cent, while Xbox will be offering 20 per cent.


ROGUE ONE'S DONNIE YEN HAS REPORTEDLY BEEN CAST IN A SLEEPING DOGS ADAPTATION



TRYING TIMES

What's next for Oculus Rift?

→ After a rough start to 2017, what's next for the diminished VR headset?

One of the biggest revelations out of GDC came with the news that Facebook-owned Oculus was to begin slashing prices on its virtual reality Rift headset and accompanying Touch controller. The news follows a rough few weeks for the tech firm, after analysts had suggested that sales are slowing and – of course – the court loss to ZeniMax over a broken non-disclosure agreement, which has lead to Oculus being ordered to pay damages of $500 million dollars (a case that may well rumble on as the decision is fairly recent).

The Rift and Touch combination will see an imminent price drop from $799 to $598 in an effort to make the hardware look more attractive to consumers, many of whom are wrestling with a purchasing decision between the powerful HTC Vive and cost-effective PlayStation VR. Sony's cheaper device, it seems, has been a success in the market – moving 915,000 units since its launch last October, surprising even Sony. Oculus on the other hand, has seen its position as industry leader weaken after launch controversies, consumer blowback over Oculus' DRM policies, and the slow launch of the touch controllers.

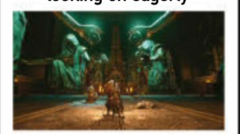
Both Oculus and HTC have seen their businesses in VR grow significantly between 2016 and February 2017, by nearly 22 per cent, but analyst reports and surveys indicate that the HTC Vive could be outselling its rival by nearly 2-1. The system and space requirements for Vive are astronomical when compared to the Rift, and so Oculus is clearly betting on the cheaper base price for the system to help drive sales in this all-important year for virtual reality.

With all three headsets now on the market – not to mention exciting revelations in the mobile field through Samsung Gear VR and Google's own Daydream device – this could end up being the technology's most important year. Ultimately, as it always has done, it will come down to the games. All three of the major devices are suffering right now, with a limited array of games on the near horizon. Sony has been relatively quiet following the launch, Vive has already begun angling itself towards education-centric applications while Oculus is still steadily testing the waters. Virtual reality may have started life as a device that was to revolutionise gaming, but the intended results are clearly harder to come by than any of us really anticipated.

Of the three, Oculus is actually looking the strongest in terms of games. While the promised line-up for 2017 is a little more understated than last year's, and with many big, announced releases – such as *Wilson's Heart* and *Lone Echo* – MIA, it's left us looking on cautiously as the firm continues to struggle to find its feet. What will the year hold for Oculus Rift? If the price drop is any indication, this will be a year of aggressive growth and expansion. Oculus and Facebook will be hoping it isn't too little too late.

Three of the most exciting Oculus Rift games

→ These newly announced titles have us looking on eagerly



MAGE'S TALE
Set in the world of inXile's *The Bard's Tale, The Mage's Tale* is Brian Fargo's studio's first attempt at creating a fully-fledged dungeon crawler inside VR. It features a complex spell-crafting system, beautiful dungeons and a combat system built specifically around intuitive spellcasting with Oculus' Touch controllers.



BRASS TACTICS
Brass Tactics is a medieval-themed multiplayer game from Hidden Path Entertainment that aims to bring table-top strategy gaming to VR. Using hand motions, you are able to scale the battlefield to your heart's content, zooming out for a god-like view of your strategies at play or get close to ground for a closer view of the action.



ARKTIKA.1
VR shooters rarely work as well as you hope they will, but *Arktika.1* is making interesting use of the Oculus' Touch controllers to change the state of play. From the developers of *Metro 2033*, *Arktika.1* focuses on small, focused battles and limited options to strafe between cover. It's functional, which is more than many can claim, and certainly worth keeping on the radar.

DATA STREAM → STARBREEZE HAS TEAMED UP WITH DOUBLE FINE TO PUBLISH PSYCHONAUTS 2

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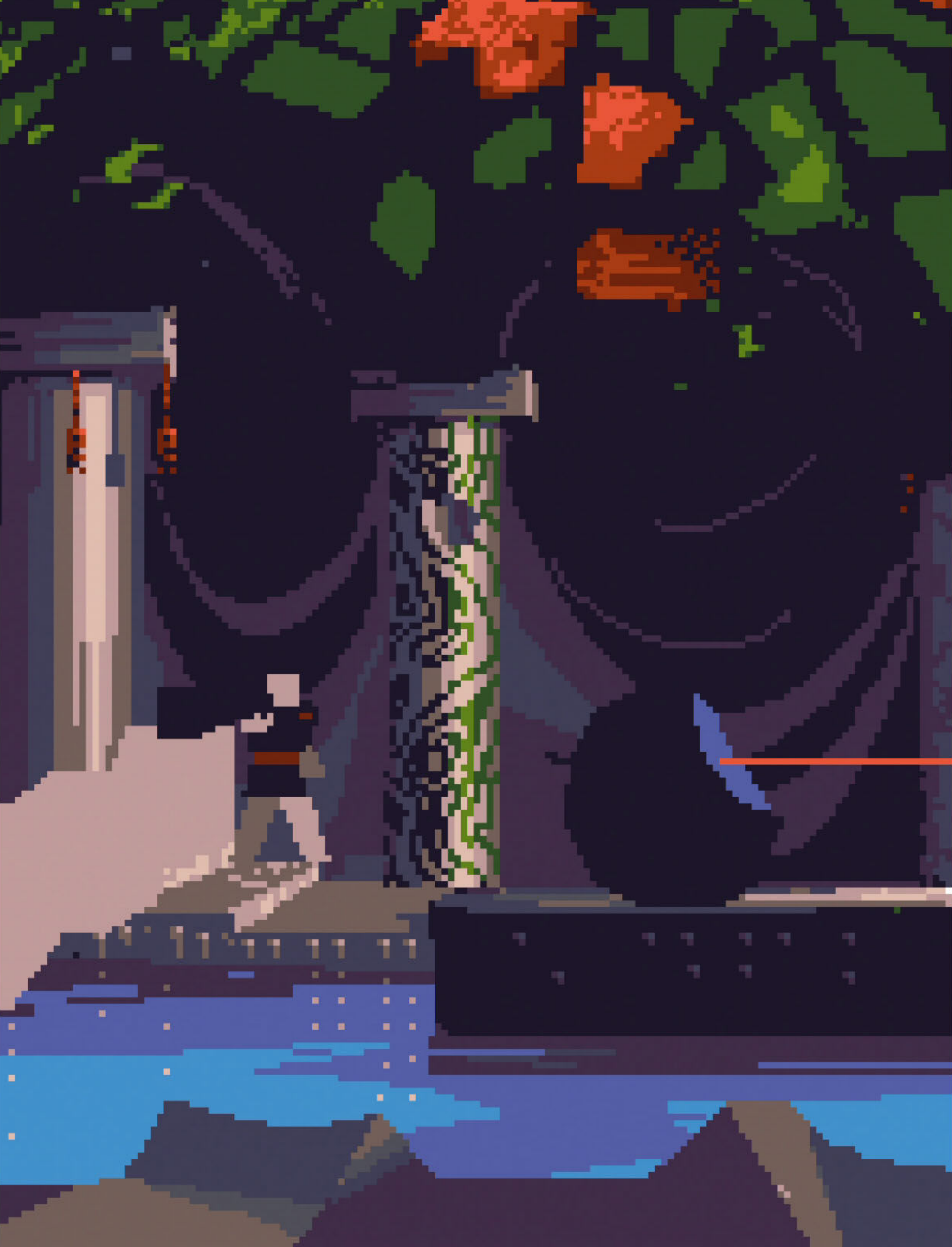
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"Another World is timeless – you can play it today and it will still look beautiful"

RAÚL RUBIO, TEQUILA WORKS

WHY I ♥...

ANOTHER WORLD

RAÚL RUBIO
TEQUILA WORKS

My favourite game ever is Another World. *I still remember the first time I played the game; I was obsessed with the introduction. I spent weeks just looking through the first few minutes of it. I was familiar with rotoscoped animations before, but to me this was just perfect.* Another World *is timeless – you can play it today and it will still look beautiful.*

That was the first game that made me question how video games are made. The further I got through it, the more I was convinced that it was a masterpiece. I always thought that [director] Éric Chahi had such a clear vision, but then 20 years later I discovered that he had no idea! He was literally making it scene-by-scene; he didn't even know how it was going to end. That's why it's such a hardcore game.

But it was a very clear example to me that I wanted to make games. This is exactly what I wanted to make, and maybe that's why Deadlight *is so heavily inspired by* Another World.

The Switch version of this game comes with an improved resolution on TVs when the console is in the dock, upgrading the experience from the Wii U's 720p to 1080p instead. The lighting appears to be improved too.



BATTLE MODE

IT'S PARTICULARLY GOOD to see Battle Mode getting some additional love with this new release for *Mario Kart 8* as it's been an underserved portion of the series in many respects. The re-introduction of the feather power-up will please players who look to lure in prey before striking with a blitz of shells, while the recreation of the classic SNES arena is already inducing some rather gruesome flashbacks to our earliest experiences with this game mode. It was bad enough then with only two players, but having eight chasing each other around and bursting balloons promises to be an intense way to share this game. It will be fun to see how the *Splatoon*-inspired track works too.

Above: The Inklings from *Splatoon* make their first appearance in a cross-over Nintendo game in *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* having previously been referenced as costumes for Miis in *Smash Bros.* It's another step to tying them into the Nintendo family. Right: Two-player Splitscreen on the Switch screen is small, but works really nicely as the resolution and colour clarity of the device is very good indeed.



Mario Kart 8 Deluxe

CONCEPT ■ It's Mario Kart 8… again. But more than that, it's the perfect game to show off how much easier and more communal Switch can be.

Once more with feeling

At this point jumping into a game of Mario Kart is like putting on a particularly well-worn and comfortable pair of shoes. They've been well broken in, they go with every outfit you own, but they may not be great in bad weather conditions. That metaphor may have run out of steam a little earlier than we had intended, but we don't expect *Mario Kart* to innovate or revolutionise any system it lands on. We just expect it to deliver and that's what this Deluxe edition is doing.

The reasons why this particular release has us excited though are numerous and all to do with *Mario Kart* getting back to its roots and making the best use of the Switch console. Those who played the original *Mario Kart* on the SNES will remember that even when playing solo the game was always in split screen, with the lower screen showing a map of the track. That's because *Mario Kart* was always supposed to be enjoyed as a multiplayer experience, feeling almost empty without at least one other person to compete against, and the Switch makes involving at least one other player so much easier with the Joy-Cons.

We played *8 Deluxe* against seven other players with linked Switch systems and against one other human player using the detached Joy-Cons and found both setups to be as thrilling as you would hope. The simplicity of a classic *Mario Kart* gran prix plays nicely into the strength of the Joy-Cons as fully-functional controllers in their own right. Playing hunched over with one of them in hand as you lean in to get a good view of the Switch screen propped up on a table manages to encapsulate everything that is best about the intimate multiplayer experience of this series. Taking the racing action to the Switch unit has seen nothing is lost in the mean time.

Connected up with seven other players, you get to appreciate how good the game looks on this device. While the screen resolution on the portable is not better than the Wii U version, there are some improved lighting elements to enjoy (and it outputs at 1080p on a TV if you plug into the dock). Eight-player racing is about as good as it gets as everyone picks their favourite character and then combines that with so many different vehicle varieties. *Mario Kart* has really evolved over the years to allow for a much more customisable experience and this version of the game is so packed full of content that those options are greater than ever before.

All of the tracks available on the Wii U are included in this game, with the addition of all DLC courses too, meaning that you'll start with at least 48 courses including all of the anti-gravity tracks and some classic courses from back in the day. On top of this, you get all of the DLC characters to pick from and a new batch of drivers including Inklings from *Splatoon*, plus the return of King Boo, Bowser Jr. and Dry Bones. And to wrap things up nicely and re-emphasise the importance of multiplayer to the whole experience, you have some additions to Battle Mode. There's some new courses, including one inspired by *Splatoon*, as well as a return for the classic SNES Battle Course and *Luigi's Mansion* arena.

> "Fans can enjoy the definitive version of Mario Kart 8 anywhere, anytime, even with up to eight friends in local wireless multiplayer"
>
> PRESS RELEASE NINTENDO

Ease of access, unbridled fun and a wealth of different options are what have always made *Mario Kart* a joy to play, and *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* has probably the best assortment of features and content that the series has offered to date. On the Switch it can enjoy the best of both worlds as an online or couch multiplayer experience at home or as a local multiplayer experience on the move. *Mario Kart* has worked well in both scenarios in the past and it's no different with this release.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Switch
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo EPD
Release: 28 April
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

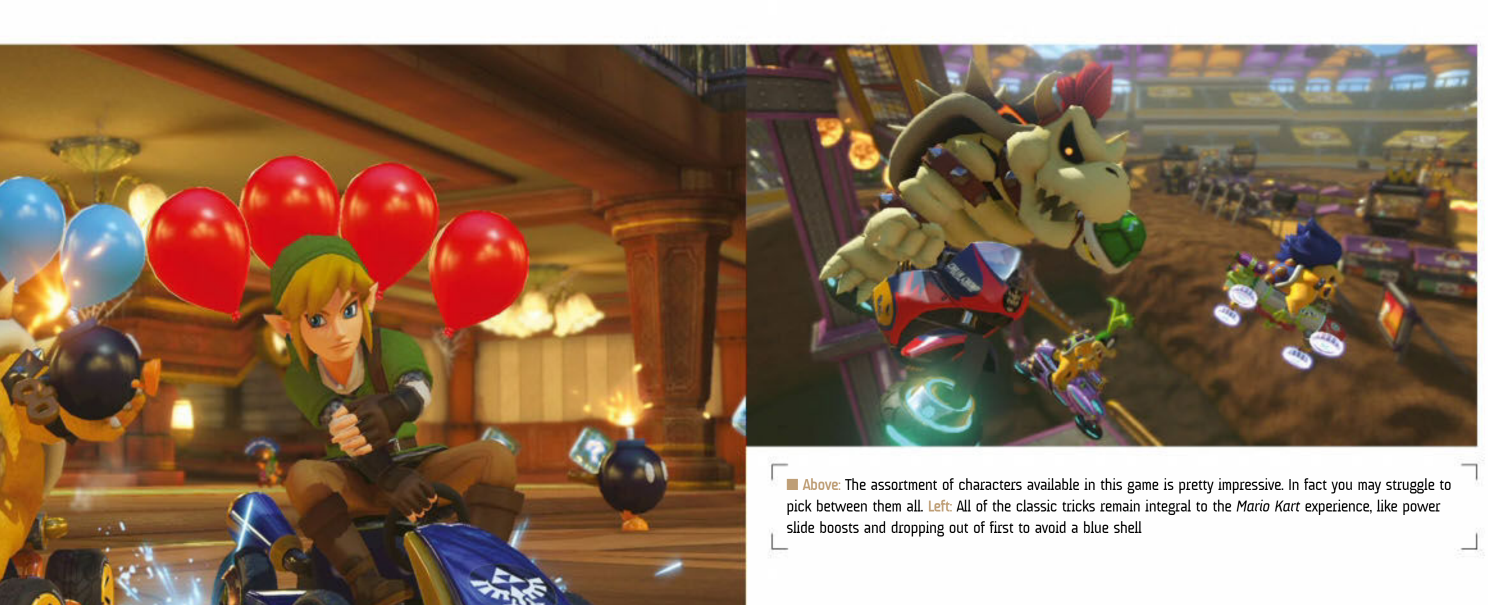
Nintendo's Entertainment Planning & Development division was only created in 2015 after two of the largest sectors of its business, Entertainment Analysis and Software Development, were brought together as one team. This is the team that are launching Nintendo onto mobile and diversifying its licensing arrangements.

Developer History

The Legend Of Zelda: Tri-Force Heroes **2015 [3DS]**
Miitomo **2016 [iOS, Android]**
Super Mario Run **2016 [iOS, Android]**
Fire Emblem Heroes **2017 [iOS, Android]**

High Point

Super Mario Run is probably the most important release from this mega-division so far as it has started the migration of Nintendo properties to mobile. Its download figures have been impressive.



■ Above: The assortment of characters available in this game is pretty impressive. In fact you may struggle to pick between them all. Left: All of the classic tricks remain integral to the *Mario Kart* experience, like power slide boosts and dropping out of first to avoid a blue shell

> "As you cling to what remains of your humanity, your decisions will ultimately shape the fate of your hero"
> DONTNOD PRESS RELEASE

Vampyr

CONCEPT ■ Dontnod brings its special brand of self-contemplation and decision making to England in the early 1900s, casting you as a vampire struggling with his duty as a London doctor

Emerging from the shadows

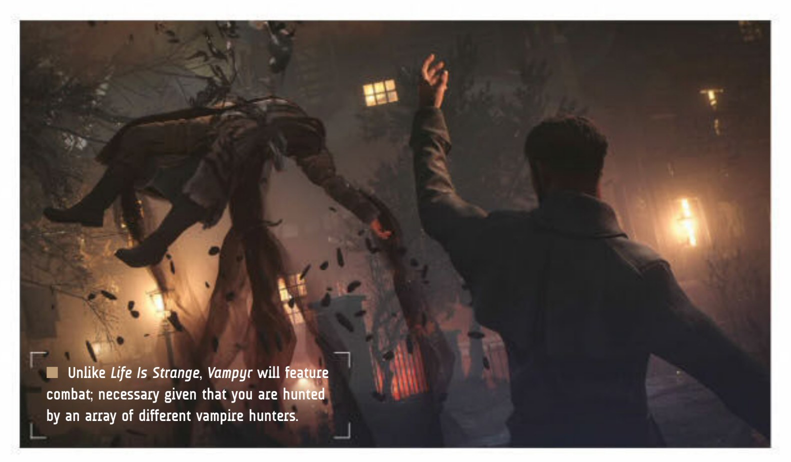
On the surface, it may look like the time to start worrying about *Vampyr*. At a Focus Home showcase event **games™** recently attended, we were supposed to be given the opportunity to see the progress developer Dontnod – working on its follow up to *Life Is Strange* – had been making to its upcoming action RPG, but there was little new to see.

Vampyr is based on the 1918 London Spanish flu pandemic, with the influenza flu outbreak augmented by the struggles of a doctor turned vampire; the push and pull between upholding the Hippocratic Oath and fulfilling a growing hunger for human blood the central narrative mechanic and gameplay hook. "The sum of your decisions and experiences as a Vampyr will trigger very different endings," said Dontnod's Phillipe Moreau, adding, "We have four endings, including one if you manage to finish the game without killing anyone. Trust me, that's a hard challenge."

We can see why. The story and levelling up mechanics are essentially tied together, where you are only rewarded XP if you decide to drain victims of their blood. That act will, of course, have its own set of consequences throughout *Vampyr*'s semi-open world, with the moral quandaries behind such an act pulling the story and difficulties in different directions; investigating potential victims, their lives, and trying to suss out any potential consequences is as open or closed as you'd like it to be. It's an interesting attempt to tie RPG levelling together with nonlinear narrative conventions, but we're desperate to play it for ourselves now, especially after such a lengthy development cycle – not to mention a release date on the near horizon.

Still, Dontnod did show us new alpha footage of *Vampyr* in an effort to showcase how far the game has come since E3 2016, citing a desire to avoid wasting time and resources on a new demo build. And, well, it looks impressive; a far cry from the somewhat limited production values of episodic *Life Is Strange* and its somewhat forgettable predecessor, *Remember Me*. *Vampyr* has a finality to its investigation and decision systems that other games rarely attempt to include, let alone succeed at. It promises an experience that will force us to question and confront the acts that we are committing, a game of careful self-examination more than action blockbuster.

While this all sounds good on paper, and the latest footage looks promising, it's simply impossible to tell until we have the opportunity to finally get hands-on for ourselves. The time for *Vampyr* to emerge from the shadows is here. Whether Dontnod can guide it successfully into the light remains to be seen.



■ Unlike *Life Is Strange*, *Vampyr* will feature combat; necessary given that you are hunted by an array of different vampire hunters.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC
Origin: France
Publisher: Focus Home Interactive
Developer: Dontnod Entertainment
Release: Q4 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

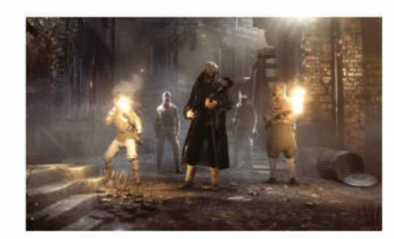
Founded in 2008, Dontnod has swelled in size despite its incredibly small portfolio of work. *Remember Me* released in 2013 to little fanfare, although *Life Is Strange* immediately put the studio on the map. The episodic adventure was a welcomed departure from the Telltale style, and its success has given Dontnod the opportunity to pursue independently built, triple-A business.

Developer History

Remember Me
2013 [Multi]
Life Is Strange
2015 [Multi]

High Point

Life Is Strange was a surprise episodic success. It told an intimately captivating supernatural story, all framed around two teenagers struggling to deal with the realities of choice, consequence, growing up and, erm, time travel.



"There is a real upscaling of our catalogue and The Plague will undoubtedly be one of the highlights of the next year of Focus"
CEDRIC LAGARRIGUE FOCUS HOME INTERACTIVE

A Plague Tale: Innocence

CONCEPT ■ *A Plague Tale: Innocence* sees two siblings trying to escape the horrors of persecution, isolation and swarms of horrific, diseased rats in this intriguing new IP from Asobo Studio.

■ Above: *A Plague Tale: Innocence* puts you in control of Amicia, the older of the two siblings. Hugo is the younger, at just six years old. Impressively, Hugo acts like a child, rash and unpredictable, making for some amazingly tense moments.

Welcome to gaming's best rats

As a general rule of thumb, technical demonstrations should always be approached with caution. It isn't that developers are ever purposefully disingenuous, it's just that a development cycle is essentially a process of managing steadily shifting parameters; ideas and priorities can change, while systems and mechanics can grow or fade over time. But, on a rare occasion, it's OK to just be impressed by what you're seeing in front of you while praying that the final product can somehow maintain the same momentum.

A Plague Tale: Innocence is over a year away from release. The segment we saw might not even be in the final game, but its central starring game system will be, and that's enough to get excited about – dynamic rats. Yep, from the developers of *Ratatouille* comes a game where you are forced to avoid and utilise swarms of gorgeously grotesque plague rats that have essentially overwhelmed the streets of an unnamed city in medieval France.

The central premise sees two siblings attempting to reconvene with their parents and escape the city alive. Already, even at this early stage, there is a clear focus on the relationship between the two being exploited for emotional narrative drive and creating ingenious puzzles to overcome – not unlike that of *Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons*, sans the control system of course. It's a nice touch with plenty of promise, but it's the rats that really hold the attention.

As a game mechanic, what Asobo has been able to achieve is interesting; as a technical accomplishment, what Asobo has been able to achieve is incredible. Swarms of rats are everywhere, with each individual creature moving dynamically and independently of one another. They react violently to splashes of light, ripples in a black sea of teeth and eyes.

The rats are attracted to flesh and shadows, terrified of the light. The kids are forced to use the environment (or a small slingshot) to create patches of light to enable for unchallenged movement, in the form of destroying lanterns and torches carried by hostile Inquisitors. It's an admittedly tense affair, and unflinchingly grim too; enemies are torn apart, screaming as you plunge them into darkness, using the distraction to quickly sneak past a flood of scurrying rats.

It's too early to know how *A Plague Tale* will turn out, but its central premise has us hooked. It's fluid, reactive and an intuitive solution to spicing up what could be otherwise fairly conventional light-based puzzles. Asobo has set itself a 2018 window – we can't wait to see what it does within it.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: France
Publisher: Focus Home Interactive
Developer: Asobo Studio
Release: Q4 2018
Players: 1

Developer Profile

There is the Asobo you know and the Asobo you don't. The former is that of a studio known for its successful licensed titles, while the later is one working off in the shadows and playing with new technology. The studio has a habit of collaborating with other studios to assist with development, while it also has two HoloLens projects in the works.

Developer History

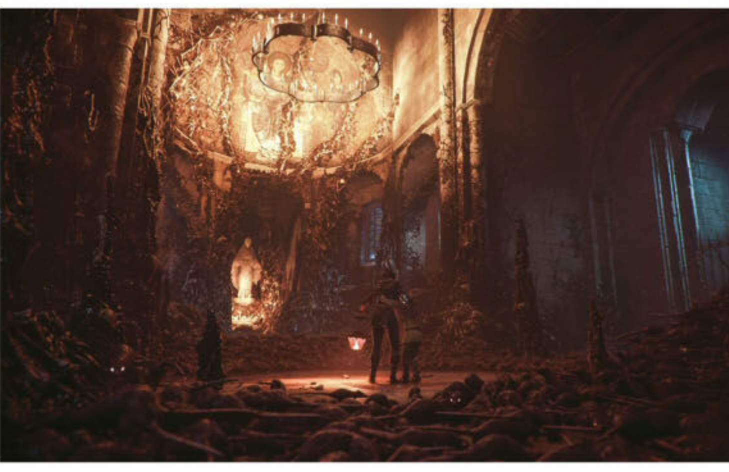
Ratatouille **2007 [Multi]**
Fuel **2009 [X360, PS3]**
Up **2009 [Multi]**
ReCore **2016 [Xbox One]**

High Point

Partnered with Codemasters, *Fuel* showed great potential but it tried to accomplish too much with too little, its open world one of the largest ever created (at the time).



■ Above: Dynamic rats are one of the most impressive technical accomplishments we've seen in a while, moving like liquid poured from a cup.





Project Cars 2

CONCEPT ■ *Project Cars 2* is aiming to be the most realistic, progressive and impressive racing game ever released, pushing boundaries in graphical fidelity, handling and dynamic simulation.

It doesn't get much realer than this

***Project Cars* was everything we had hoped it would be.** The Community Assisted Racing Simulator (CARS, get it?) was a success for Slightly Mad Studios, going a long way to prove that there was still an appetite for ultra-realistic simulation racing games, putting *Forza Motorsport* and *Gran Turismo* to the test as it set a new benchmark for the genre.

Slightly Mad is back then, with a sequel purpose built to further push the envelope. Stacked against the competition, *Project Cars 2* seems uniquely progressive and deeply ambitious. The studio is evolving its stunning physics system, bringing a new degree of realistic simulation to the track; the weather system has been overhauled, furthering *Project Cars*' dominance over its long-standing rivals; it's once again involving the community at every step of development, implementing progress and innovations around their feedback and input. *Project Cars 2* is a game made by experts, steered by fans, and ultimately designed for the people that matter the most to the studio.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Xbox One, PS4
Origin: UK
Publisher: Bandai Namco Entertainment
Developer: Slightly Mad Studios
Release: Q4 TBC
Players: 1-32

Developer Profile

Founded in 2008, Slightly Mad Studios is the UK-based studio behind *Need For Speed: Shift* and community-funded racing simulation *Project Cars*. The studio has become a respected force in the industry thanks to its realistic physics system and innovative weather system, all fuelled by rampant fan interest and communication.

High Point

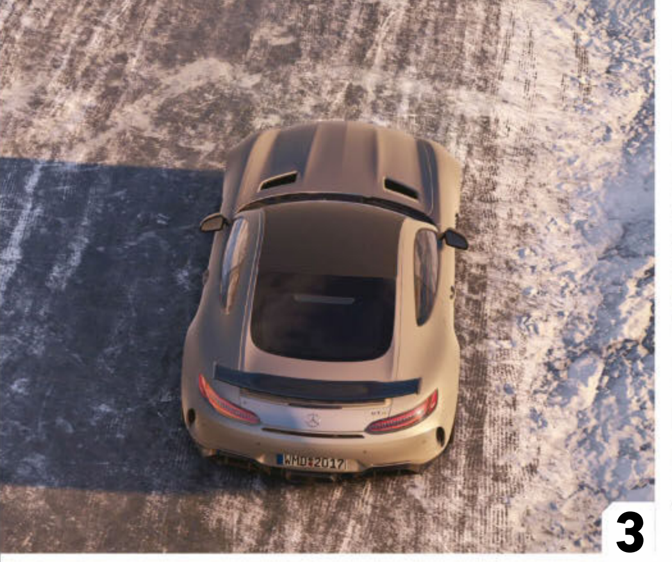
Project Cars was a true achievement in a genre that had long grown stagnant between the duelling of *Forza* and *Gran Turismo*.

Developer History

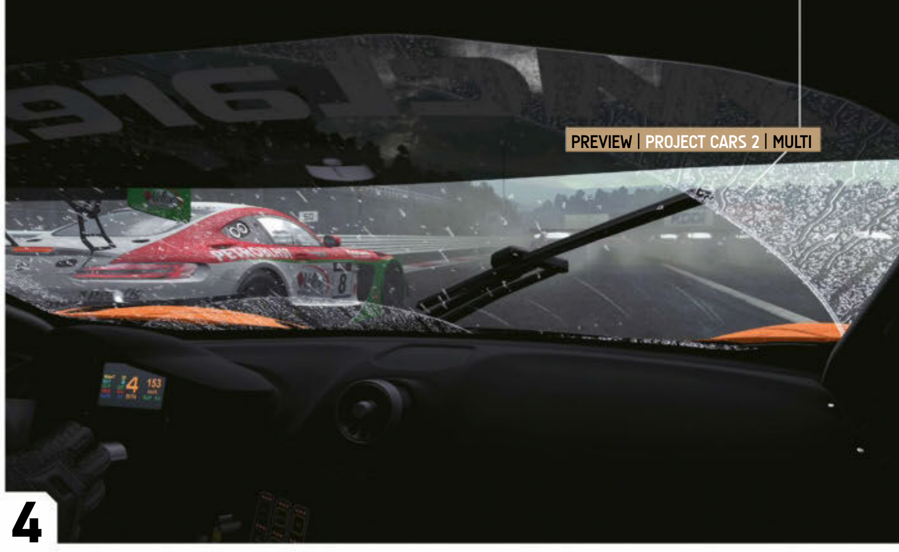
Need For Speed: Shift **2009 [Multi]**
Shift 2: Unleashed **2011 [Multi]**
Test Drive: Ferrari Racing Legends **2012 [Multi]**
Project Cars **2015 [Multi]**

1 DEVELOPMENT IS BEING LED BY A DEEP COMMITMENT TO IMPROVING

Slightly Mad Studios has a slightly mad commitment to constructing its sequel around critical and community feedback. The resulting experience is perhaps the closest the industry has come to bringing the essence of real racing to the realms of interactive entertainment. *Project Cars 2* is bringing a suite of upgrades to the studio's already impressive first effort; all 170 licensed cars are being 1:1 digitally recreated, the precision physics engine and AI systems are being overhauled, gamepad controls are being improved, while the dynamic real-time surface and seasonal conditions are being better integrated to directly affect vehicles and play. *Project Cars 2* is a deeply impressive, progressive experience.



3



4

5



"Project Cars 2 brings together the essence of real racing in the most beautiful, authentically crafted, and technically advanced racing game on the planet"

SLIGHTLY MAD STUDIOS PRESS RELEASE

2 SEASONAL AND WEATHER CONDITIONS WILL TRULY DISRUPT PLAY

Project Cars 2's weather isn't just for show, it's bringing a geographically-accurate, dynamic solar and weather system into play. That means that, in theory, every lap should unfold differently. As rain falls, pools of water will form on the track, affecting traction and handling, forcing drivers to alter their tactics and driving lines; later, as mud is worked across the track or as these pools evaporate in the sun, further changes to conditions will occur. The unpredictability of the environment is what will make *Project Cars 2* feel like the most realistic of the simulation racers. The way you manage the shifting conditions feeding into whether you are able to win or lose a race – just like in real life.

3 STATE-OF-THE-ART WEATHER AND PHYSICS SYSTEMS

Considering how slow the competition has been in integrating realistic weather conditions into their respective games, it's truly impressive in what Slightly Mad has been able to achieve in just a fraction of the time. The condition of the tracks in *Project Cars 2* – the largest roster to ever feature in a console racing game – dynamically transition as the weather and time of day shifts, which alters the grip physics across tarmac, dirt, and ice surfaces. Weather and temperature changes dynamically in real-time across all four seasons, essentially recreating the atmospheric conditions real-pro racing drivers have to contend with.

4 EVERYTHING IS OPEN FROM THE BEGINNING

Slightly Mad Studios isn't reneging on its controversial approach to progression, once again ensuring that all cars and tracks will be available to players from the beginning of the game. The studio doesn't want to gate off content, ensuring that racing aficionados can drop directly into their tier of choice, while beginner motorsport fans will be able to experiment to find what class of vehicle and difficulty curve better suits their play style and competency. The studio hopes that, by having such an open-ended design, it can teach players the language of motorsport – encouraging a deeper love and understanding of the wider sport.

5 IT'S STILL GOING TO BE HARD AS ALL HELL

As ever, the focus for *Project Cars* is going to be on the state-of-the-art tech and the way it is driving the simulation towards more realistic avenues. Already we've seen this demonstrated; the focus on the way in which weather, time and temperature effects the tracks and vehicles in very real, dynamic ways – with the physics of tires affected by how they come into contact with track surfaces. It can be a little too much for the casual racing fan to understand. *Project Cars 2* is the next step for sim-racers, and if you're the sort of racing fan that believes using the brake button is redundant, you'll likely encounter a lot of resistance from the game.



■ Left: Every piece in battle has a role to play even if it is ultimately to nudge a Vek enemy into range of another asset you have on the board. You'll need to think two or three moves ahead at times. Below: The style reminds us a lot of *FTL* even if the viewing angle is a little different. It carries itself with a similar simplicity on the surface, but with plenty of tactical depth to be found



Into The Breach

CONCEPT ■ The *FTL* team turns its attention to turn-based strategy with a similar level of granular detail and procedurally generated originality.

Are you ready for mech chess?

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: Subset Games
Developer: In-house
Release: TBC 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Subset Games was formed by Justin Ma and Matthew Davis who act as the artist and programmer on the studio's projects respectively. They formed the studio having both worked at 2K Shanghai with their first project successfully getting funding on Kickstarter. That game was *FTL*.

Developer History

FTL **2012 [Multi]**

High Point

FTL is the only title Subset Games has produced so far, but it has been a tremendous success. It was funded to the tune of $200,000 on Kickstarter and became an indie hit on PC and iPad.

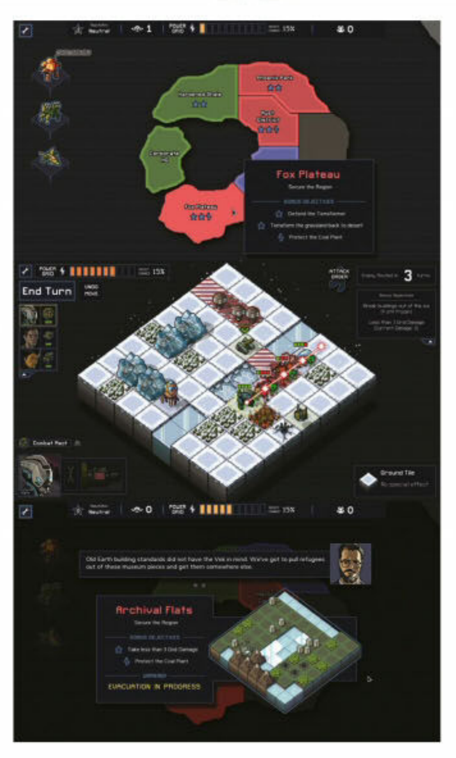
How do you follow a massive indie success story like *FTL* with its space exploration, rogue-like gameplay and tactical depth? With a reinterpretation of turn-based strategy that looks a lot like playing chess with awesome mechs, of course.

Subset Games has been working on its follow-up to the popular space sim since 2014 and it appears to be riffing on titles like *Advanced Wars*, *Earth Defense Force* and even chess to find the kind of simplified and yet deep tactical gameplay that fans of FTL might expect from this team. *Into The Breach* sees you command a mechanised military unit against gigantic creatures who have been emerging from beneath the surface of the earth. Your mission is simply to defeat these enemies wherever they may appear to protect the civilian population and property you find around you.

There are, of course, some twists to that tale and rather interesting ones too. The game is procedurally generated for starters, which should offer no end of original battlefields to take on and a myriad of experiences to be found every time to begin the game. The mechs and monsters you have on the field may be the same each time, but the environment can have a massive impact on the experience. For instance, we've seen already that destroying rock formations on the map can release water onto the field, killing the Vek who have risen through the ground.

And then there's the civilian buildings, from which your mech army actually gets its power. If buildings around you begin falling at the hands (or wings or tentacles or whatever they may have) of the Vek, then your ability to fight will be depleted. You also need to watch out for friendly fire damaging your own homeland. If you successfully defeat the enemy then you may discover new technologies that can be used to build new and improved mech units for your next battle.

Which brings us to the chess-like element of this particular tactical experience. Most turn-based games carry a healthy dose of table-top influence with them, but Into The Breach also has pieces on its board-like play areas with differing attack and movement patterns. Making the most of your team requires that you see the whole board, plan out the series of moves that will defeat the enemy and counter any of its potential attacks as simply as possible.



The final wrinkle in this intriguing new title from Subset Games is time travel. Since failure is considered "not an option" you must go back in time in the hopes of setting up a new timeline that will see humanity rise victorious. What does that mean for the timeline you leave behind? Can you ever go back and fix the mistake you made? We're looking forward to finding out.

> "Each attempt to save the world presents a new randomly generated challenge in this turn-based strategy game"
> PRESS RELEASE SUBSET GAMES

A DOCUMENTARY FEEL

■ Something you'll notice from any live gameplay footage of *Little Nightmares* and when you get your hands on the game itself is that it boasts a rather cleverly controlled camera system that allows you to look a little to the right and left of the standard fixed camera view. It gives the game an odd handheld camera feel more like you're watching a documentary than a fantasy world.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Sweden
Publisher: Bandai Namco
Developer: Tarsier Studios
Release: 28 April
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Tarsier Studios has been supporting Media Molecule for a number of years now working on DLC and ports of its key releases like *LittleBigPlanet* and *Tearaway*. In the mean time it has continued to pursue solo projects, but *Little Nightmares* will be its first since *Rag Doll Kung Fu* to get a release.

High Point

Being lead developer on the PS4 port of *Tearaway Unfolded* is probably the studios biggest credit to date, but the release of *Little Nightmares* could well top it.

Developer History

Rag Doll Kung Fu: Fists Of Plastic **2009 [PS3]**
LittleBigPlanet PS Vita **2012 [Vita]**
LittleBigPlanet 3 **2014 [PS3, PS4]**
Tearaway Unfolded **2015 [PS4]**



WHAT LIES IN THE SHADOWS?

The high contrast of light and dark in the game means that every corner could hide something terrifying or offer an ideal hiding spot for Six as she attempts to steer clear of the denizens of The Maw. Your lighter will help to illuminate corners for a short while, but may end up revealing your location to anyone (or anything) that might be watching.

SIGHT UNSEEN

Something else to bear in mind as you enter a new room or area in *Little Nightmares* is that there are often elements out of frame that give you some insight into the world you've found yourself in. For instance we can't be entirely sure, but we feel as if we saw a room with someone's feet dangling from the ceiling, which you'll only see as you climb up some shelves or drawers. The creeping dread in this game is potent.

Little Nightmares

CONCEPT Six finds herself trapped in The Maw, a tower-like structure full of horrors and creeping threats. Your only mission is to escape.

Lurking in the shadows

Creepy doesn't really even begin to describe the feeling of *Little Nightmares*. It may shroud itself in some rather cute and weird looking character designs, but this is really a horror game at heart. It's a game where one misstep means your character's capture and death. It might be friendly with its reloads, but that doesn't make failing any easier to take.

Six's journey through The Maw has had us entranced from the beginning and now, as it draws closer to release, we have a much better sense of the gameplay balance and variety it will be offering. We had been concerned that it might prove to be a little light on content and challenge, but it seems clear that if it lacks anything in puzzle complexity it will make up for it through time pressure and impending doom.

One of the smaller elements that we hadn't really noticed until recently was how smartly it uses (or more often doesn't use) music and sound effects to draw you into the experience. There's very little atmospheric sound, so you're forced to lean in the capture any sense of what's happening in the world. That only makes the stings of music or shouts of alarm from the creatures in The Maw more startling when they happen.

> "It's taken us about ten years to come to this moment, to reveal the most exciting game in our company history!"
>
> ANDREAS JOHNSSON TARSIER STUDIOS

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War III

CONCEPT ■ Set in Games Workshop's *Warhammer 40,000* universe, *Dawn Of War III* is a real-time strategy game with a focus on interpreting the abilities of different factions. It is the first release in the series since 2011.

Embrace the competitive space, marines.

"We are a deep strategy game and there is going to be continued balancing work once the game reaches the public. I'm not arrogant enough to think that we are going to get it absolutely right on day one, but the team has put in a lot of work to get it as close at we can."

These are the words of Philippe Boulle, a veteran designer on the *Dawn Of War* franchise and director this upcoming third instalment. His expectation that changes will be required post-release, as well as his desire to make them, speaks clearly to the added emphasis the team at Relic Entertainment is placing on its latest attempt at translating the *Warhammer 40,000* universe into a real-time strategy framework. If there's one thing that instantly renders a multiplayer experience redundant it's a lack of balance.

Multiplayer sees you select between one of three factions – Space Marines, Eldar, Orcs – each of which has their own strengths and weaknesses. Where the Space Marines are individually tough they lack the finesse of the Eldar, whilst the Eldar's complexity makes them more difficult to learn than the Orcs and their accommodation of many play styles.

Getting the right balance has been a case of focusing on the factions and their respective units as a priority and then building a base of interactions around them. In Boulle's words: "the purest form of the interactions happen when you strip away the objectives and what you're left with are the unit-to-unit relationships."

Couple this intent on providing a purity of interaction with maps that are decidedly symmetrical in their design and you've a fertile bed upon which to allow a dedicated multiplayer community to nest itself within.

Playing a match of *Dawn Of War III* does have a certain MOBA-like feeling to it in that you're using your core units to grab control of certain channels of land containing resource-boosting hubs, whilst waiting for your 'elite' units to become available so that you can make attacks on the enemy's base a realistic immediate ambition.

Of course, you can't mention 'MOBA' without also bringing 'eSports' into the conversation and that's an area that Relic is most certainly interested in breaching.

"Our focus at launch has always been to have a great campaign and a solid, fun multiplayer, but I do think there's a lot of potential on the eSports side," explains Boulle.

"A lot of our decisions regarding gameplay have been around reducing the level of randomness involved and making everything more responsive. They are goals that also line up with eSports. I can't make this game an eSport as that something the players have to decide they want. In a year from now will we be talking about eSports leagues? I hope so, but we'll see."

The other aspect of making a working eSport title is visual communication. Games in this space have to be as fun and as easily understood by the player as they are by the audience, even if a viewer has never played the game in question.

To this end there has been a focus on making sure that visual effects match the importance of the event they are representing. Rather than ramping up the exaggeration on every visual element and risking player and audience concentrating on something less important than what's happening elsewhere, the greatest emphasis has been reserved only for those occurrences that deserve it.

There is a nuance and intelligence required to achieve this balance without undermining the visual impact of the game as a whole, but if *Dawn Of War III* wishes to establish itself as an option for competitive players then it absolutely must embrace this design approach.

If Relic can deliver something that is relevant to both the evolving eSports scene as well as the legions of players that make up *Dawn Of War*'s existing fanbase then it will be in prime position to deliver the kind of superlative experience we've come to expect from the series. The history and form of the studio suggests that we've got every right to expect and demand greatness.

> "Will everyone agree with all of our decisions? Probably not, but I hope everyone sees that the goal is to make a great Dawn Of War."
>
> PHILIPPE BOULLE, RELIC ENTERTAINMENT

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Relic Entertainment
Release: 27 April 2017
Players: 1 (2- 6 online)

Developer Profile

Relic made its reputation with 1999's *Homeworld* and has been one of the premier names in real-time strategy ever since. For the past decade it has concentrated the entirety of its efforts on the *Dawn Of War* and *Company Of Heroes* franchises, games that have become benchmarks of the sci-fi and WWII strategy space respectively.

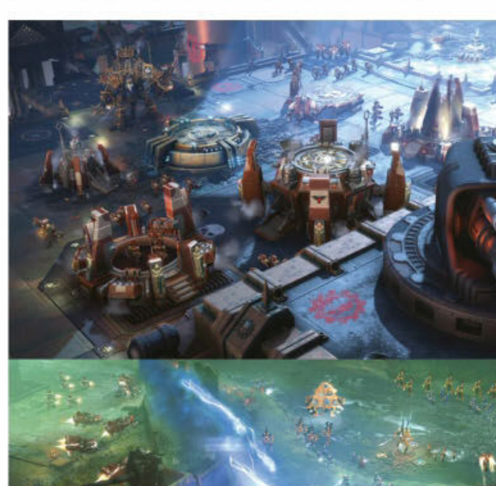
Developer History

Homeworld **1999 [PC]**
Dawn Of War **2004 [PC]**
Company of Heroes **2006 [PC]**
Dawn Of War II **2009 [PC]**
Company Of Heroes **2013 [PC]**

High Point

Thanks to its stunning art design and wonderfully diverse gameplay options, *Homeworld* owns the Metacritic honour of being the highest rated PC game of 1999.







■ Above: Map design encourages you to think about how to engage your enemy across a number of different ranges.



Above: Late game multiplayer matches look, genuinely, spectacular. By this time you've probably brought your biggest and best hardware to the field, and the firepower it brings is as visually impacting as it is dangerous for your opponent's health. Below: If you're good at timing the bringing of your elite units to the field then you will always have the advantage of surprise.

THE FACTION TRIANGLE

Game Director Philippe Boulle talks us through the basics of the three playable factions:

"The Space Marines are perhaps the easiest to get into because the units are more solid and forgiving, but they are not a 'vanilla' faction by any means. Their drop pods really change how they play and they have a lot of options when it comes to turning the tide of a match.

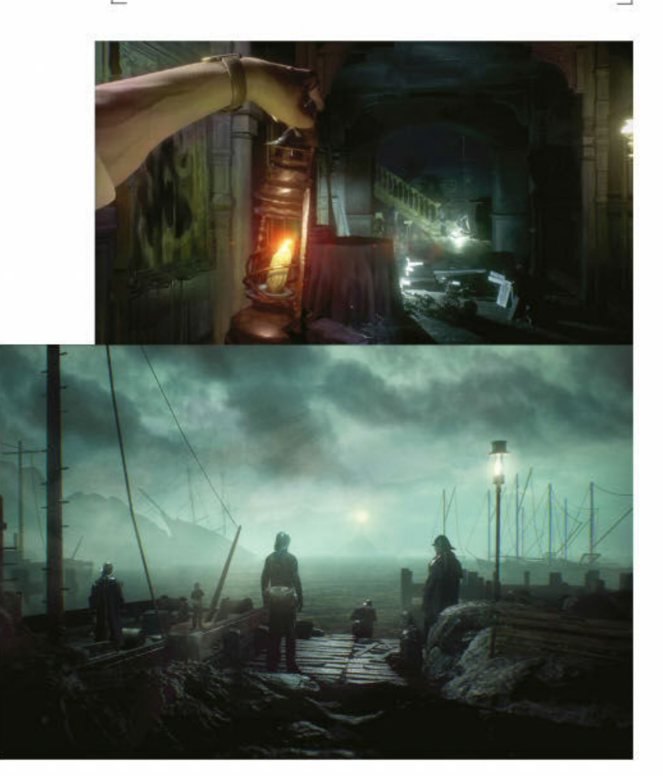
"The Eldar are all about hitting and running and making use of their mobility, whereas the Orcs are probably the most flexible because they can be upgraded in a lot of different ways. The fact that the Orcs can be build units from the field gives them a character that is quite different from how we've portrayed them before."

Call Of Cthulhu

CONCEPT ■ While Sherlock Holmes developer FrogWares was once at the helm of *Call Of Cthulhu*, development is now being fronted and re-focused by Cyanide Studio.

Summoning the will to live

■ Above: *Call Of Cthulhu* features a fairly simple, although surprisingly deep, investigation system. *Sherlock Holmes* fans will feel at home with it, although Cyanide's equivalent isn't quite as obtuse as the FrogWorks version.



■ Above: One area that needs serious consideration for overhaul is the dialogue writing and voice acting, it's worryingly ropey.

When you are trying to survive the horrors of a Lovecraftian-inspired nightmare, there are very few things that can help prepare or protect you against the twisted monstrosities that stir in the shadows. But in *Call Of Cthulhu*, the upcoming action RPG from Cyanide Studio, knowledge is your most powerful weapon – ammunition in the fight against one of the most infamous and mysterious creatures of all time.

But here's the kicker: the more you know, the harder your mission becomes; the faster your grip on reality will slip away. As you use your investigative skills to discover clues and draw conclusions on the events transpiring on Darkwater Island, the further your descent into madness will occur. On the surface, *Call Of Cthulhu* might just look like a re-skinned version of a 'Sherlock Holmes' adventure, but the truth is that while the two are similar in style and presentation, Cyanide is desperately trying to build something with far more depth and spirit than anything the FrogWares has attempted before.

It isn't a resounding success – not yet, at least – but the foundations for a unique experience are certainly here. Cyanide promises that its game has been closely modelled on the 1981 Chaosium *Call Of Cthulhu* tabletop RPG – rather than HP Lovecraft's original short – creating a traditional adventure that comes with a deep debt owed to character sheets and skill checks. Across a semi-open world, you'll be tasked with using your skills as Edward Pierce, a soldier turned private investigator, to seek out clues, disable threats, investigate scenes of interest and generally do your best to stop the return of the Great Old One Cthulhu – although any Lovecraft fans will probably already know how futile that action is ulitmately going to be.

> "Cyanide has been wanting to make a Call of Cthulhu adaptation for years"
>
> CÉDRIC LAGARRIGUE FOCUS HOME INTERACTIVE

What's interesting is how Cyanide is essentially using knowledge as a weapon, both in aid and against you. The more you know, the more capable you are; investigating environmental clues to further power your deductions and progression, but here capability also controls the madder that you might become. This is because a sanity metre, one that continues to be chipped away at as the game continues, governs all of your actions.

As you encounter some of the warped horrors of the island, you'll begin to see your



FAIL STATE

CALL OF CTHULHU features a system whereby your sanity is treated as a resource, ever dwindling as you further progress through the game. One point of friction sees the game enter a fail state if your sanity drains entirely, a shame, considering games such as *Eternal Darkness* – that found success using a similar mechanic – instead ramped up the weirdness when your connection to reality was lost. By forcing you to confront a respawn screen when your sanity expires, it feels as if Cyanide is overlooking an opportunity to really play with the mythos and twist the contained spaces it has so lovingly crafted here into some unique gameplay experiences.

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin:
Paris
Publisher:
Focus Home Interactive
Developer:
Cyanide Studio
Release:
2017
Players:
1

Developer Profile

Formed in 2000 by seven ex-Ubisoft employees, the studio was known for its annualised *Pro Cycling* games, but rose to prominence in 2009 after it took on the classic *Warhammer* property, *Blood Bowl*, with Focus Home.

Developer History

Blood Bowl **2009 [Multi]**
Styx: Masters Of Shadows **2014 [Multi]**
Space Hulk: Deathwing **2016 [Multi]**
Styx: Shards Of Darkness **2017 [Multi]**

High Point

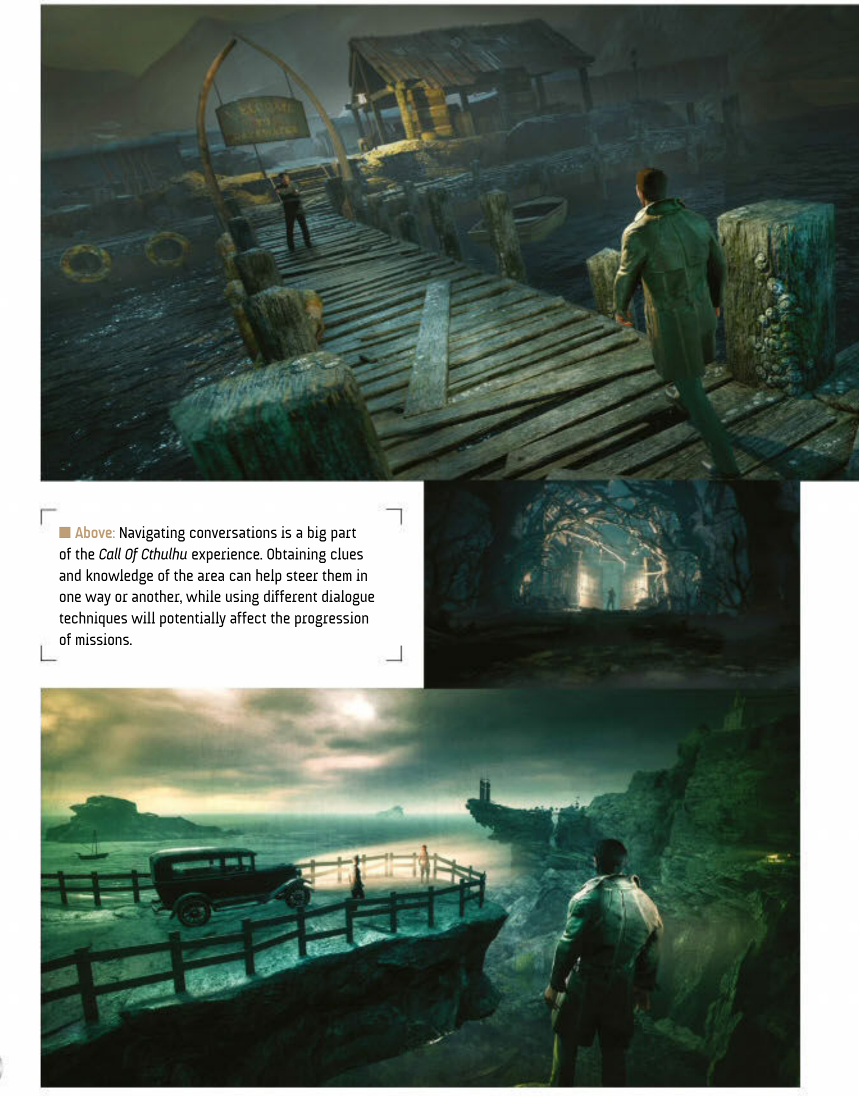
Cyanide made fantastic use of the *Blood Bowl II* license, releasing a game that not only paid homage to the classic board game, but also delighted with its fun mechanics and deep systems.

sanity unravelling. You can't fight back against these monsters, and so you'll be forced to run and hide – or use the environment in clever ways to avoid confrontation.

Even looking at monsters will begin to drain your sanity metre – a fail state should it empty entirely during gameplay– and so the best tactic is often to hide in cupboards. The problem for Pierce – as luck should have it – is that your dwindling sanity also causes him to develop a series of phobias throughout the game; in the section we saw, for example, Pierce was struggling with claustrophobia, hiding in enclosed spaces was as dangerous to the psyche as staring into the eyes of the monster chasing you.

There will be various phobias in the game, forcing you to constantly switch up your play style and approach to situations; all of this augmented by the fact that your dwindling sanity meter will induce hallucinations and other such horrors around you. This will come into play in every facet of the game, from the deep conversation wheel – affecting your route through certain missions, discussions and areas – to the RPG systems that increase you abilities in specific areas, such as Social, Knowledge and Profession.

Attempts to summon the legendary beast into the digital realm haven't always been met with success, but there's a certain charm to Cyanide's *Call Of Cthulhu* that has captured our attention. It seems more capable and competent than a typical FrogWares adventure – a studio who were once at the helm of their own *Call Of Cthulhu* project with Focus Home – but there is still so much left to see and experience. Still, those with a love of dark mysteries and Lovecraft-inspired adventures will want to keep a close eye on how this one progresses.

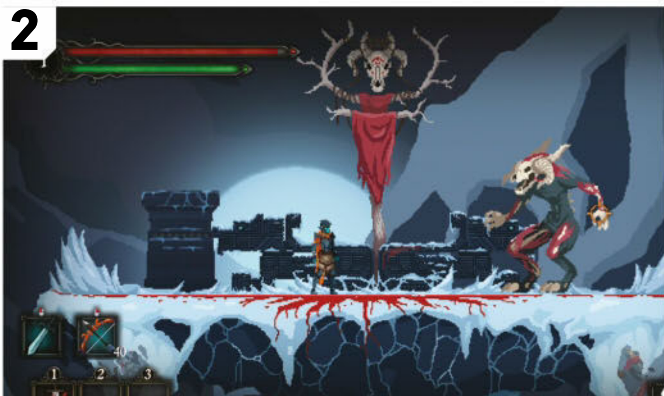


Above: Navigating conversations is a big part of the *Call Of Cthulhu* experience. Obtaining clues and knowledge of the area can help steer them in one way or another, while using different dialogue techniques will potentially affect the progression of missions.

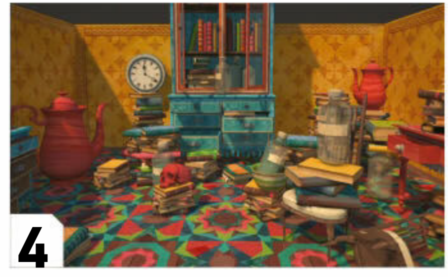
SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

1


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5


YONDER: THE CLOUD CATCHER CHRONICLES

Format: **PS4, PC**
Publisher: **Prideful Sloth**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q2 2017**

1 This is looking like a bit of classic adventuring to us with a nice mix of cute, cartoonish character design and large, open spaces to explore. The lighting and foliage models alone for this game make it stand out as something a little bit special. The tale itself is about a child seemingly left on an island and suddenly faced with an encroaching darkness that only you can stop. You can interact with other islanders, farm, cook, craft, and brew your way into their lives and go off and explore the environments. With some former Activision and Rockstar experience at the helm of Prideful Sloth, expect some reasonable polish.

DEATH'S GAMBIT

Format: **PS4, PC**
Publisher: **Adult Swim Games**
Developer: **White Rabbit**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

2 Adult Swim really has been picking up some fascinating titles and this has all the makings of a classic. With its Gothic fantasy trappings, hit points and pixel art, it already has the *2D Dark Souls* comparisons locked in and then suddenly you see the camera zoom out to present you with *Shadow Of The Colossus* scale bosses. And yes, you can climb on them. The animation is smooth, swift and packed with variety, belying its pixelated design. You play as an agent of death itself seeking to free the creatures of this world of the blight of immortality. It is a great game concept with truly gorgeous presentation.

POWER DRIVE 2000

Format: **PS4, PC**
Publisher: **Megacom Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

3 Looking like an Eighties album cover brought to life, *Power Drive 2000* is an arcade racer that depicts the world of action racing in the future, if you were still in the age of New Wave. So, it's really our past, but their future. It doesn't matter really, because what it means is Eighties sports cars with bright neon lights and nitro boost that lasts for so long you wonder why that isn't just your top speed. But then, constant boost would deprive you of the wonderful drifting you can do on the corners. The soundtrack appears to be suitably synthy and while the tracks seems rather simple, we're hoping it will flesh out the deeper you get.

SOMEWHERE

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Studio Oleomingus**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

4 As first person exploration games go, we've not seen many as surreal and colourful as this one. *Somewhere* is set in colonial India as you hunt for a mythical city. Only you don't do it by just chatting with a bunch of people you meet, you become those people and uncover their stories in the process, looking for clues about Kayamgadh as you hop between hosts. You can actually play some early tests of this concept on itchio called *Rituals* and *Timruk* as the team has been experimenting with this format for some time. It's also getting support from the India Foundation for the Arts, which bodes well if you ask us.

THE SHROUDED ISLE

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Kitfox Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

5 A village management simulator you say? How quaint. How parochial. How… what do you mean by blood to feed the old gods? Yes, *The Shrouded Isle* is not just a town sim, but also cult management sim as you must lead your congregation for the end of days. We're expecting something a lot like *Papers, Please*, but instead of working as a border guard you are making human sacrifices, attempting to pick between the virtuous and the wicked to appease the dark lords you serve. It's a great concept and the art style is pretty intense with its neon green colouring. All of the villagers will be procedurally generated too.



THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

PREY

IS PREY 'BIOSHOCK IN SPACE' OR SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY?

Contact with Talos I has been lost. Set securely in lunar orbit, a menace – the likes of which we have never before encountered – is threatening to break free and change humanity's course forever. Talos I was always designed to contain, but this, it seems, is simply too much for the ageing Russian space station to bear. What is the true cost of curiosity? Humanity is about to find out. A vicious and unexplainable alien is running rampant, rebelling after years of experimentation at the hands of various corporations and government agencies. There are some things we were never meant to meddle in; extracting technological secrets from vastly powerful, mutating non-terrestrial lifeforms is one of them – though that knowledge is of little comfort now.

Alone you must fight for answers and freedom, for survival. The station's crew is MIA; presumed dead, or worse – prey to a powerful alien threat. Destiny has led you into the chaos, but how far you are willing to go to ensure the survival of the human race is up to you and you alone. The real question is this: how much of yourself are you willing to lose in the process?

Arkane Studios is working hard to master a lost art. The immersive sim largely died with the closures of Looking Glass, Ion Storm and Irrational Games. Studios that pioneered a unique design philosophy in the likes of *Deus Ex*, *Thief*, *Ultima Underworld*, *System Shock* and its sequel; each broke from the traditional first-person template to make a daring push toward immersive, player-reactive videogames. Dependable, interlacing systems would allow immersion and player agency to remain undisturbed, while intuitive NPC design and objective tracking would ensure that every action was met with a suitable reaction. With *Prey*, Arkane Studios is making a deliberate play for an unoccupied space in the market; leaning on the lessons learned in the past three decades to better create an immersive sim for the modern generation.

Some studios would take issue with being so aggressively associated with other IP, but Arkane takes such comparison with pride. "I don't think I could possibly deny that assertion," admits Seth Shain, lead systems designer at Arkane, as we ask if *Prey* is a love letter to the immersive sims of days gone by. »


MORGAN

"It's true that we love those games. They are the games that inspire us. We're very aware of what we're building," he says, adding, "We carry this tradition of immersive sims in our studio's DNA and we're not forgetting where we came from and what inspired us."

If Arkane's previous effort, *Dishonored*, was leaning on the legacy of *Thief*, then *Prey* is unquestionably tapping into the mastery of *System Shock 2*. At a surface level, Arkane has the essentials locked down: *Prey* has a vast space station to explore and an ineffective wrench as its first useable weapon, a protagonist with a dark past and an array of enemies to face that are simply out of this world. Set aboard Talos I, *Prey* takes place across a sprawling orbital research facility turned hunting ground for a host of shadowy alien monstrosities, dubbed the Typhon. It's here where you will become intimately familiar with Morgan Yu, a woman (or man, should you be so inclined) looking to undo her past indiscretions made while heading up the TranStar Corporation's neuroscience research program.

As a concept, it is unquestionably familiar, but the execution is anything but. Arkane has approached *Prey* with a nonpareil attention to detail, although the first thing that grabs us – when given the opportunity to get our hands-on a near final build – is the quality of the bathroom installations aboard Talos I, the finest you are likely to find this side of 2052. Shain laughs as we bring this up in our chat after the fact because, for him, immersion can live or die by a good shower.

No, really. Do you recall JC Denton being reamed out by his boss for innocuously stepping into a women's bathroom? It's a small, easily avoidable element of *Deus Ex* that ultimately solidifies the game's principle design philosophy: that nothing in the world should remind you that you are playing a game. Shain recalls that encounter easily, rejoicing in the memory of stumbling upon it with his friends back in 2000, but, he tells us, this is exactly the type of feature that Arkane is so intent on archiving and reviving. "Back then, bathrooms were a big deal in games. The quality of representation was very low, so if the game even had a bathroom it was like 'oh my god', it was this nod to reality! 'It's like the real world, it has real bathrooms!' It would encourage you to explore every inch of every level.

"That's actually really important to us," he considers. "We could have just locked the bathroom door in your apartment and said you can't get in there, but then it would have been weird; '*why* can't I get in my own bathroom?' Players start asking those questions," says Shain, noting that opening the doors is only half the battle, it's what you can do once inside that truly counts. "Once we let players in the bathroom they are expecting everything to work, and then if they don't work they are like





The Gloo Cannon is found early on in *Prey* but it is one of your most essential tools, used for both navigating the world and neutralising the speedy alien threats. It's a multipurpose item that feels great to use.

> "If the game even had a bathroom, it was this nod to reality! It would encourage you to explore every inch of every level"









Prey is heavily influenced by the immersive sims that have come before it, sharing DNA with the likes of *System Shock 2* and *BioShock*, although it has expanded on the lessons learned and suitably expanded the scope of play.

'well, why doesn't anything work?' We know that sets the tone for the rest of the game. That if we shut the player down in the first five minutes of trying things then for the rest of the game they will be like, 'well I know the shower in my bathroom didn't work so why would anything else work?' and then they are just going to stop trying. Those first couple of minutes are very crafted in order to set the tone for the rest of the game and to continue to invite the player to experiment and try things."

Like the immersive sims before it, experimentation is at the heart of the experience. In *Prey*, Arkane wants you to play in its sandbox and push the boundaries of everything; you are to embody chaos within Talos I, utilising everything at your disposal in an effort to break it apart. But to allow for such an unbridled amount of choice and experimentation, Arkane had to lean on two principles: masterful mechanical design which, in turn, meets generic, general systems design. And, we promise, it's a lot more interesting than it sounds.

For a game as ambitious – as inherently open and driven by player intuition and engagement – as *Prey* is, there's actually a relatively simple design philosophy and process behind its core competencies. Every utility in the game is built to aid Yu in her continued survival against the Typhon, as impossible as that might seem at times. You will often find that you feel woefully underpowered and unequipped to deal with the surmounting terrors – survival is earned through inventive use of the tools you come across, upgrading your powers and manipulating the environment to your every whim. This can be as simple as utilising a shotgun to blast holes in encroaching enemies, or as weird as, well, transforming yourself into a thermos to avoid altercations altogether.

In essence, *Prey* is designed to be played your way – no two playthroughs should ever be the same. When you hit an obstacle, there is always more than one way to overcome it. The answer to problems is never made explicitly clear, and this is done in an effort to push the player into making instinctual, creative decisions to move forward. While *Dishonored* was designed in the same vein, it was also a stealth game focused around the fantasy of assassinations and shadow stalking; *Prey* leans closer to an action-RPG by design, and so the opportunity to meticulously plan out the fastest, most efficient method of silently murdering everything in your path isn't as apparent or obvious. Arkane would rather you jump into combat or exploration and really push the boundaries of its systems, because you might just be surprised by the results. If you ask a question of the game, Arkane wants each one of its individual, interlocking systems to say 'yes' to you, reacting in a fashion that will keep you guessing and surprised at every turn.

"We design our features to be generically interactive, if that makes sense," explains Shain. It doesn't, but he elaborates. "We try to generalise as much as possible so that when we [place] an object in the world, that object will have properties and can then have any number of inputs and expected outputs." In practice, it's as obvious as coming across a ceramic vase in the world, hitting it with a bat, and expecting it to break. The fun comes into play when you begin to take all of these obvious, and quite generic, reactions and mix them in with strange otherworldly objects to get unexpected results. How would, say, the ceramic vase react when hit with a fiery thermal blast? What if you *became* the vase and used it to roll through a security window to bypass a monotonous crawl for key cards and door codes? It's these kinds of questions that lead to *Prey*'s best moments.

One of the powers earned early on is Mimic, which lets Yu take the form of any item she can target. While the trailers have used this power to showcase your ability to turn into a coffee cup, in theory you could quite as easily transform into an operator drone or turret. Another power is Lift, an ability »



The shotgun is one of the best weapons to come across in *Prey*. It feels powerful and heavy; it feels like it has been ripped right out of an id Software release.

that localises propulsion to throw items and enemies around your immediate area. By accident, Arkane discovered the turret and Lift power could be used in tandem to great effect. "We never explicitly programmed this, but a level designer just tried it, [and] it was like, what a glorious moment that the player found. What a creative solution.

"There were a bunch of Mimics up on a second floor and a turret below them on the ground. The level designer put a Lift power down right on top of the turret, which pushed it up to the second floor where it could see the Mimics and started shooting them," laughs Shain. "All Lift knows is 'I lift things'. All the turret knows is 'I shoot aliens when I see them'. We never programmed those two things to interact explicitly. It was just generically the Lift wants to lift things and the turret wants to shoot things and that just works out," he says, noting that it's also possible for you to become the turret in that instance, exchanging your limited Psi energy resource for a momentary burst of unlimited ammunition. "That's the philosophy we have for how we design our systems, to try to enable things to work out that way – we keep things as generic as possible so that they just interact generically with each other."

But that is the point of the immersive sim. Even if the game world and premise is otherworldly, your sense of its reality should never be broken. This is supported by the open-world, but ultimately enclosed, environment of Talos I – a sprawling space designed for zero-gravity excursions and traversal. A dynamic quest system reacts in real-time to your capacity to bypass entire sections of the game, while an array of other (more human) tools and abilities can be located and put into action to further warp the normalised progression routes.

There's a Gloo Cannon that shoots a cooling glue agent, perfectly useable for disabling enemies but better used to create instantaneous cover or solid blocks Yu can then use to climb into new areas of the game map. There's an item recycler that takes any physics objects in the area and converts them into resources that are later used for crafting – a Fabricator can then be used to essentially re-create any item in the game, so long as you have found the necessary blueprint. Upgrade points can be poured into an array of standard abilities, such as hacking, stealth and strength (and yes, you can shift boxes around to your heart's content), while chipsets can be located and used to upgrade your TranStar suit and enemy-scanning Psychoscope. This, following *Dishonored*, was a huge focus for the studio.

"We definitely wanted to support players using any combination of builds that they could think of. There is no wrong build in the game," says Shain. "We think about the chipsets as small mutators on the gameplay. It's a way for the player to continually reconfigure and retool their player build, either to the players' whim or to match the obstacles that they can encounter," he continues. "There is an analogue you can draw between chipsets and [*Dishonored*'s] Bone Charms. I think for those of us that worked on *Dishonored* 1, we kinda felt that maybe the Bone Charms didn't make enough of a difference – maybe, like, some of the effects weren't felt enough. So this time around we wanted to make sure that when you equip a chipset you notice the difference. And so we tried to make sure that they were all changing the game in a way, even if it is minor. That was a key thing; you should feel the difference that a chipset makes."

All of this comes together to make *Prey* feel quite unlike anything the studio has crafted before. It has the same core competencies that Arkane is known for: dynamic AI systems and sublime mechanical control, as seen in *Dishonored 2*, mixed with deep and powerful RPG systems not seen since 2002's *Arx Fatalis*. Ammo may be scarce in the opening hours, but the weapons feel empowering; the shotgun in particular has already found a place in our heart, feeling like an ode to id Software's masterful weapon design – a welcomed alternative to the Psi powers, should you be so inclined.

The biggest challenge for Arkane at this point is ensuring players don't simply get lost in its labyrinth. So many of the problems you encounter can be solved creatively, bypassed



OTHER SURVIVORS

HOW YOUR INTERACTIONS WITH FELLOW PASSENGERS WILL SHAPE PREY

Talos I is largely abandoned, but there are signs of life scattered throughout its halls. Ultimately, it's up to you how you approach other humans in the game; some will be hostile, others will be quest givers and some may in fact be mind controlled. You can ignore or choose to assist as many or as few of these characters as you like.

"We want to allow players to engage the humans on the station, like they could in *Dishonored*, where they can think about these people as people and not just trivialised as the enemy," says Shain. "You will come upon people in the game that are under a mind control and are hostile to you, but you can deal with them in a way that doesn't kill them and you can actually rescue them. That's something we try and support, so if players want to play that way then they can, they can play very empathetically towards these people that have lost their own agency – it's up to the player if they want to help restore that.

"Then there are other humans around that might just be hostile and attack you, but it's up to you if you want to kill them in self defence or neutralise them somehow," he continues, noting that these decisions will ultimately affect the ending, as those humans will now no longer be around to do their particular job. Just as it is in real life, there are consequences to being a total asshole in *Prey* too.

> "We try to make sure stuff fits within the narrative context, so that it doesn't just feel like another needless game rule"

INTRODUCING THE **TYPHON**

THE ALIEN THREAT YOU WILL BE FACING IN PREY WILL COME IN MANY DIFFERENT FORMS. HERE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE HORRORS YOU CAN EXPECT TO FACE WHILE FIGHTING THROUGH TALOS I.

MIMIC
The first Typhon that you make contact with, the Mimics are small creatures capable of transforming themselves into various shapes, imitating objects. They ensure the first few hours of the game are riddled with jump scares, giving *Prey* an interesting association to *The Thing*.

WEAVER
If a Mimic gets ahold of a living human host, it will drain the Psi energy from it by shoving a tentacle down its throat. This leaves the deformed human a husk, which a Weaver is later able to seize control of and transform into a Phantom.

PHANTOM
God damn these things are hard to take down. Phantoms are the main body of the Typhon's army, bipedal creatures that can move with great speed and utilise vastly powerful thermal attacks. Load up on shotgun ammo before you step up to one of these creatures.

POLTERGEIST
If a Weaver is unsuccessful in creating a Phantom, it can instead turn the human husk into a Poltergeist. These creatures will lurk just out of sight, using shadows and cover to blindside you with attacks, hurl heavy objects at you or launch you into the air – leaving you helpless.

CYSTOID
Attracted to movement and Psi-based activity, the Cystoid are hatched from nests – which often rest in areas of activity – and follow their prey until it can make solid contact. Cystoids explode upon impact, ensuring a desperate struggle for health packs or medical bots will quickly ensue.

NIGHTMARE
The Typhon are evolving. They have recognised the threat Yu is against them and have engineered the Nightmare, a creature of untold horror that relentlessly hunts you throughout Talos I. The powerful beast will only get stronger, depending on your actions within the game.

TELEPATH
You may come across a handful of human characters on the station, but if they aren't already scared out of their minds, they may have actually had their mind stolen by the Telepath. These creatures control a victim's mind, forcing them to attack others – though it is possible to disable the link.

or ignored that keeping players on a critical path seems almost impossible. Shain is eager to suggest that the studio has it all in hand, utilising a number of playful tricks to keep players in the path of the strongest resistance.

"In games like *Zelda* or *Metroid*, they have these hard gates and they're very well telegraphed. You come up to these gates or obstacles and they very clearly require a particular tool and you know you can't do this now and have to come back later – it's very lock and key design. It's almost the opposite of how we do things. We do things in a very general way. As I was saying, we build our systems generically to work generally with things."

This is why you'll find doors locked with access codes *and* key cards on Talos I. Arkane knows its fans will try to hack them early on, that they will search online for the key code or even attempt to guess a thousand different combinations on a four-digit entry pad. It's in situations like this where Arkane trusts that the reality and narrative context it has constructed is strong enough to support gating of certain areas and sections, as rare as it may be.

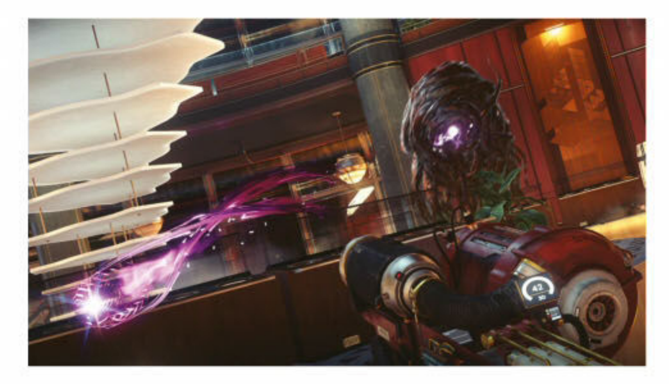
"There is one thing about the way in which we do that, that I think sets us apart from some other games. We try to make sure stuff fits within the narrative context, so that it doesn't just feel like another needless game rule. I really like the *Dark Souls* games – though they aren't the only games that do this right – but they have this design pattern, where you find a door and it doesn't open from one side, so you go around to the other side, open it and now you've got this great shortcut," Shain explains, noting how the same principle exists with *Prey*'s airlocks, which act as fast travel points with a little zero-gravity flight mixed in for good measure.

"With the airlocks, the fictional cover is a little stronger. It's supporting the idea that this is locked from the outside and there is no way to get around it, whereas in a *Dark Souls* game this is a gate and I could just reach my arms through the bars and unlock it from that side," he laughs, adding, "I think *Dark Souls* games have a different quality of immersion – for those games it is fine, but I think if we did something like that, because we have a different quality of immersion, our players would object. They would say, 'this is stupid because I can see the lock right there' or 'I have powers that can mimic something and crawl through and open it from the other side, so why can't I just reach it?'"

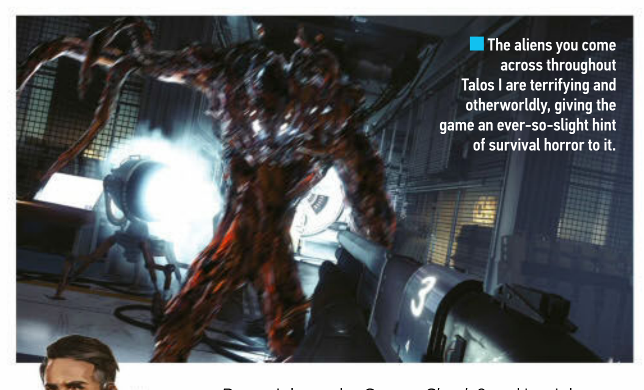
Shain is full of little anecdotes like this. They serve a particular purpose, revealing not only how much thought and care has gone into the game's construction, but also revealing how open to exploitation it is. For lapsed fans of the immersive sim, it's like the game you've spent many years waiting to play. For everyone else, however, it might still just sound like *BioShock* in space. Come on, admit it; if you've talked about the game with your friends, you've probably already made that comparison. It's something Arkane hears a lot, and it's part of the reason it has spent so much time ensuring the core competencies are so unbreakable.

"One of the things that tickles us the most is when gamers who haven't played *System Shock* look at *Prey* and say 'it looks like *BioShock* in space'. That just makes us all giggle because we all know. And then it's funny to see other people correct them and point out the existence of *System Shock*," laughs Shain. "One of the things we remind ourselves of constantly is that there is an entire generation of players now who never got to experience *System Shock* or *System Shock 2*. They just weren't around for that stuff and they may never go back and play them."

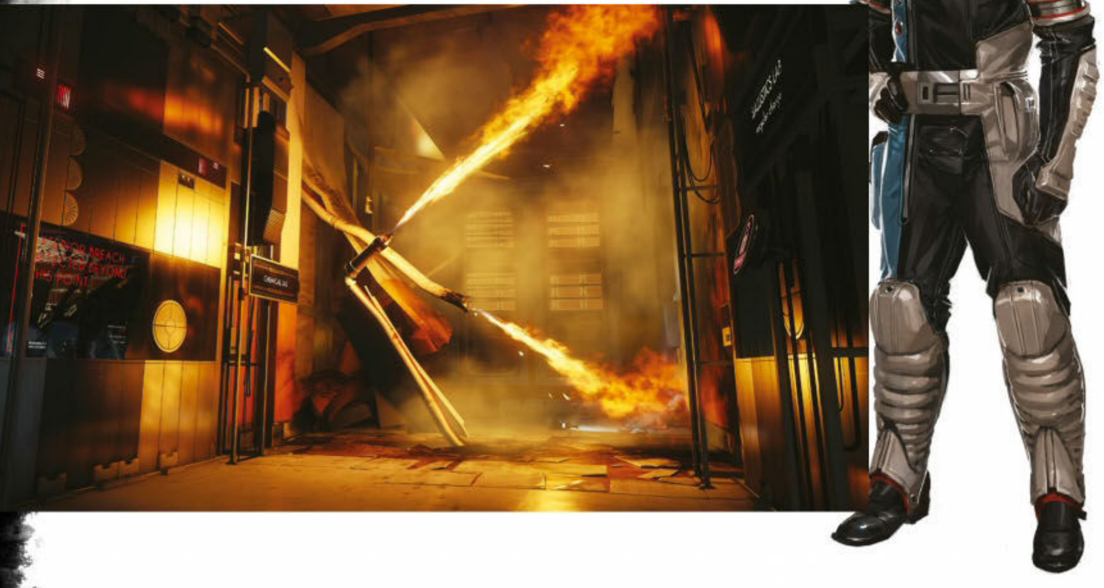
This is the pressure Arkane has put on its own shoulders. Shain is aware that an entire generation may now form an impression of the immersive sim from their work, only noticing the traditions and homages if they go back and play the older titles. That's why there is a space station, a wrench, functioning toilets and all of the other telltale signs that make for a fantastic immersive sim experience.



> One of the things that tickles us the most is when gamers who haven't played System Shock look at Prey and say 'it looks like BioShock in space'



The aliens you come across throughout Talos I are terrifying and otherworldly, giving the game an ever-so-slight hint of survival horror to it.



Prey might not be *System Shock* 3 and it might not be the next *BioShock*, but it doesn't have to be and nor should it necessarily strive to be; it's something bigger, better. A brand new, innovative and iterative genre game designed to appease the old generation of gamers and blindside the new.

"The scope of it, the audacity of it, the hubris of it," that's what Shain believes people we be most taken aback by, he certainly is. "I think that we've made a game that is bigger than the team that we have and I think we are pulling it off. I'm thrilled with how this game has come out. The sheer audacity of what we have dared to build in this game, it's a little bit mind boggling to me. The fact that we are able to stuff it all into this package called *Prey* is kind of amazing; it's a testament to the team and the passion of the developers we have here. Everybody shared in this vision and really wanted to see this thing through to the end."

You won't have long to wait to experience it for yourself. *Prey* launches 5 May, 2016 on PC, PS4 and Xbox One.

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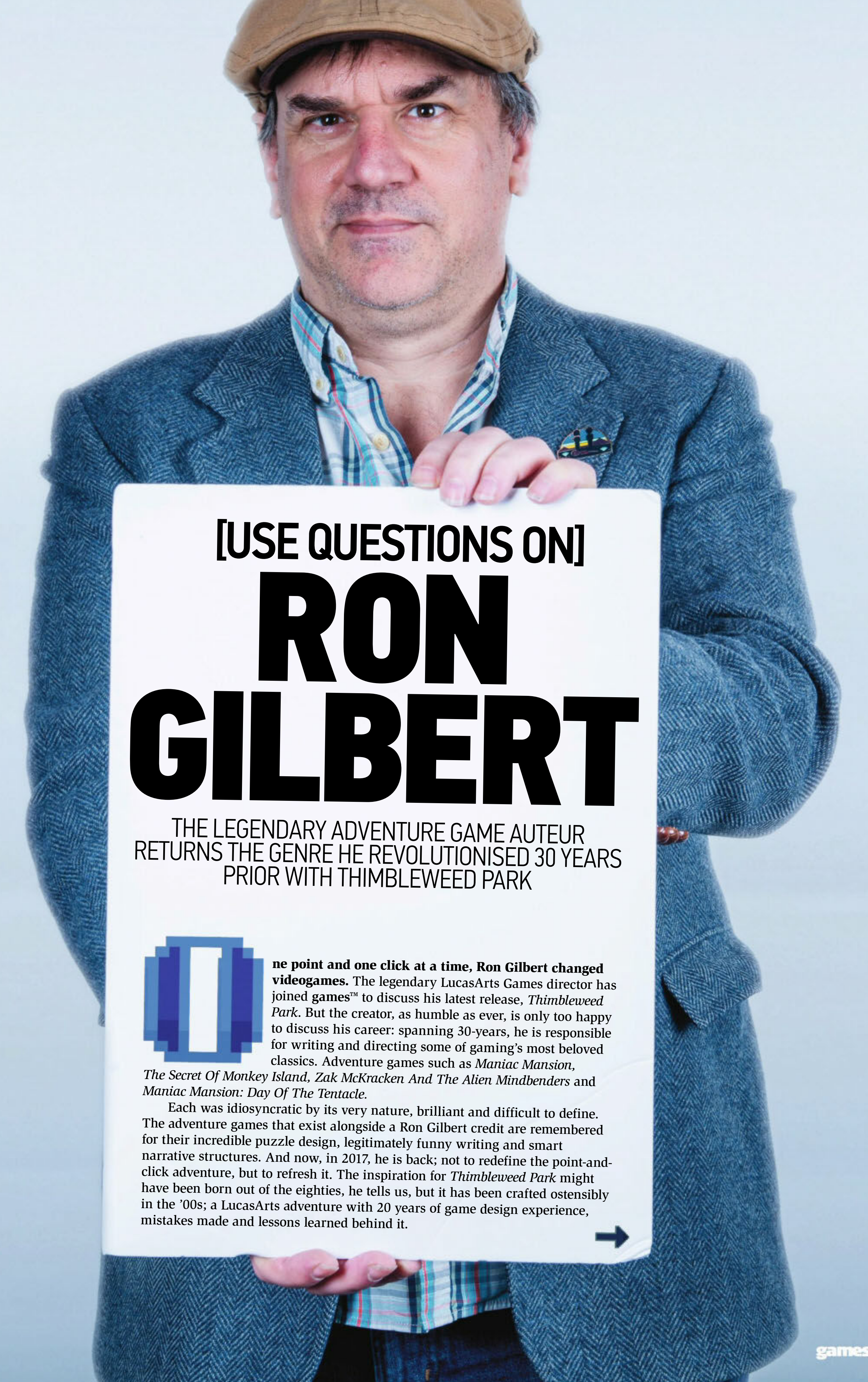
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RON GILBERT

THE LEGENDARY ADVENTURE GAME AUTEUR RETURNS THE GENRE HE REVOLUTIONISED 30 YEARS PRIOR WITH THIMBLEWEED PARK

One point and one click at a time, Ron Gilbert changed videogames. The legendary LucasArts Games director has joined **games**™ to discuss his latest release, *Thimbleweed Park*. But the creator, as humble as ever, is only too happy to discuss his career: spanning 30-years, he is responsible for writing and directing some of gaming's most beloved classics. Adventure games such as *Maniac Mansion, The Secret Of Monkey Island, Zak McKracken And The Alien Mindbenders* and *Maniac Mansion: Day Of The Tentacle.*

Each was idiosyncratic by its very nature, brilliant and difficult to define. The adventure games that exist alongside a Ron Gilbert credit are remembered for their incredible puzzle design, legitimately funny writing and smart narrative structures. And now, in 2017, he is back; not to redefine the point-and-click adventure, but to refresh it. The inspiration for *Thimbleweed Park* might have been born out of the eighties, he tells us, but it has been crafted ostensibly in the '00s; a LucasArts adventure with 20 years of game design experience, mistakes made and lessons learned behind it.



> I THINK WE ACCOMPLISHED OUR INITIAL GOAL, WHICH WAS TO BUILD A GAME LIKE YOU REMEMBER THOSE LUCASFILM GAMES

What was behind your decision to create *Thimbleweed Park*, a point-and-click adventure game with the *Maniac Mansion* creative team at the helm?
The original pitch for *Thimbleweed Park* was that it would be like opening a dusty old desk drawer and finding an undiscovered LucasArts adventure game you'd never played before.

Gary Winnick [the co-creator of *Maniac Mansion*] and I were chatting over lunch one day about the charm that these old LucasArts games had. As much as I enjoy playing modern adventure games, they are just kind of lacking it; I don't know why that is, but they just are. What is it that made *Maniac Mansion, The Secret Of Monkey Island* and *Loom* have that *charm*? We decided that, you know what, let's just make a new one and see if we can figure it out in the process.

Was the goal to simply recreate the old style, then; or to try and update it for the modern era?
The vision behind this project was very much to build a game that was evocative of how you remember those old [LucasArts] adventure titles. You remember the graphics being so much better than they were; you remember all this stuff that wasn't actually there. Now we have 20 years of game design experience and the technology to create a game that really fits your memory of those old titles.

I've talked to a lot of fans and they still grind through the *Monkey Island* games two or three times a year. So, you know what, here's a new one; here's one where you don't know all of the puzzles and all the jokes!

Nostalgia is a powerful tool, but it can sometimes be a detriment as easily as it can a positive. How have fans of those older LucasArts titles responded to *Thimbleweed Park so far*?
People who played those games look at *Thimbleweed Park* and they get this flood of amazing memories, but it's just so much more advanced than that. We have real-time lighting being cast off of everything, we have people walking under streetlights and you see the light reflect off of them; that's the stuff that your mind filled in, but now we kind of have that. When I talk to people about this being a game like you remember it, people really, really get it – 'yeah, this is totally what this is'. I think that's the thing that I'm the most proud of. I think we really, really accomplished that initial goal, which was to build a game like you remember those [LucasArts] games.

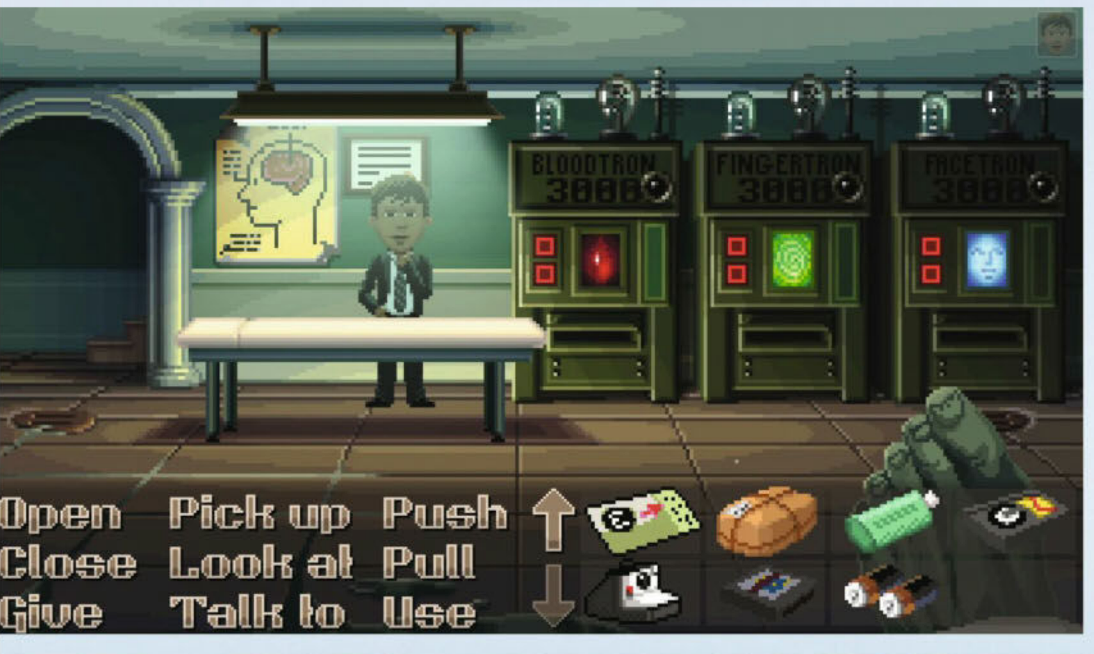
What was it like getting the *Maniac Mansion* creative team back together?
It was almost too easy to slip back into it. I've spoken to Gary [Winnick] and David [Fox] over the years, but we've never done anything else together. It took maybe two days of working on *Thimbleweed Park* together and then it was just like we were back in 1987 – it's been great.

The LucasArts adventure games are remembered for their wild humour and wit, how would you describe the creative process that allows for that to emerge?
If I look back at *Maniac Mansion* and *Monkey Island*, it was very easy for us to add stuff to the games. We would go out and have lunch, one of us would make a joke and then it would be in the game later that afternoon, just because we could. I look at games like *Monkey Island* and then I look at *Thimbleweed Park* and there is almost this improv to their design. It is so easy for us to just add stuff that we just do it. 'Oh wow, that's funny' and then it is in the game. I think that helps with the humour when you can work like that, with that kind of spontaneity.

Did you use *Maniac Mansion* or *The Secret Of Monkey Island* as a template for the design and structure of *Thimbleweed Park*?
In some ways, we were definitely using those games as a template. When we first did the Kickstarter, Gary [Winnick] and I were talking about making games about the same size as *Maniac Mansion* – as we didn't know how much money we were going to get [through the Kickstarter]. But then, after we doubled the amount of money that we needed, we were able to hire [artist] Mark Ferrari and get David Fox involved, and then we sort of refocused a little bit. It's then we were able to say, *okay*, now we can make a game that is a *Monkey Island 2* size game. In my mind, the design of this game is (probably) very, very similar to the design of *Monkey Island 2* – in terms of complexity and difficulty.

Speaking of complexity and difficulty, adventure games had a reputation for being incredibly challenging – frustratingly so, in some cases. How have you approached puzzle design in *Thimbleweed Park*?
If done correctly, the exploration, narrative and the puzzles are all just woven together – they aren't separate things. When we are trying to design these games, we are kind of building those three things up at the same time.

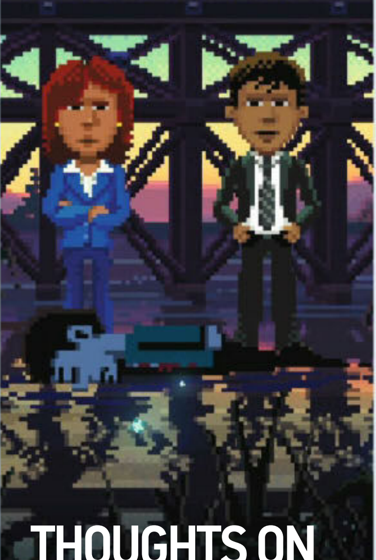
We don't go through and write a story and then think about the puzzles





Thimbleweed Park is the reunion of Ron Gilbert, Gary Winnick and David Fox, the team behind seminal adventure game *Maniac Mansion*





THOUGHTS ON THIMBLEWEED PARK

DOES RON GILBERT'S LATEST ADVENTURE GAME DELIVER?

Thimbleweed Park feels like a game out of time – never has that statement been made with more love or affection. It's brilliant and bold; a faithful homage to days gone by and a wondrous return to form for a style of game much loved but long forgotten. *Thimbleweed Park* is truly the 8-bit LucasArts adventure game that you've never played. It arrives with an infectious blend of quirky characters, an expertly crafted narrative structure and all of the witty and sarcastic dialogue Gilbert has been known to produce; the casual pace, ever-ushering you into deeper, weirder corners of the world, and the superbly twisted puzzle design helping to build an undeniable sense of place with this surprising, impressive and reactive adventure game.

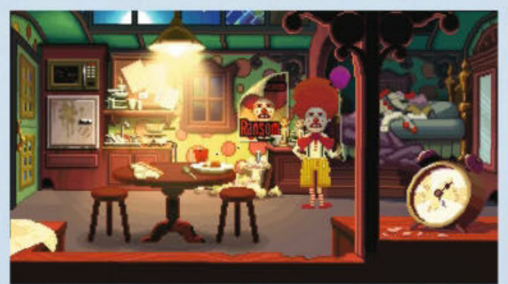
The game does, of course, lean quite heavily on teachings and design quirks of the past – unashamedly so. But the team behind *Thimbleweed* has been able to subvert them, bend them to create a technically impressive and ultimately engaging adventure that would have struggled to run on the hardware born out of the Eighties. We've played five hours of *Thimbleweed Park* and are desperate for more; it's a love letter to the past and a call to arms for the future.

I SEE GAMES LIKE FIREWATCH AND GONE HOME AS AN EXTENSION OF THE LUCASFILM ADVENTURE GAMES

It's funny, but you've never seen an 8-bit game look quite as good as this. While Retro in style, *Thimbleweed Park* is modern in execution, with the studio leaning on the extra memory and storage space available to create a game that just wouldn't have been possible back in the day







DEFINING MOMENTS

In a career spanning three decades, these are just a few of Ron Gilbert's finest moments



MANIAC MANSION [1987]

The game that kick-started Ron Gilbert's career and drove an overhaul of the adventure game genre after Sierra's reign of tyranny, *Maniac Mansion* is still a classic to this day; remembered for its smart puzzle design, loveable game world and unmistakable, unique sense of humour.



THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND [1990]

Perhaps Ron Gilbert's most famous creation, *The Secret Of Monkey Island* was a revelation when it landed in 1990. Its strange and loveable characters, all inhabiting a sublime world just begging to be explored, the game set a benchmark that others would struggle to match for decades to follow.



MONKEY ISLAND 2: LECHUCK'S REVENGE [1991]

Ron Gilbert himself credits *Monkey Island 2* as a better game than its well-loved predecessor, and it's difficult to argue; such is the quality of both. Many remember its sarcastic wit, incredible puzzles and wonderful sense of place fondly; proof that Gilbert has an unmistakable understanding of the genre.



PUTT-PUTT JOINS THE PARADE [1992]

If you're wondering where Gilbert disappeared to in the nineties, he formed Humongous Entertainment and switched his focus to developing an array of enjoyable adventure games focused squarely at children. Born in the late eighties? It's likely you'll remember *Pajama Sam*, *Putt-Putt*, *Freddi Fish*, and *Spy Fox*.



THE CAVE [2013]

Two decades after Gilbert left LucasArts he returned to the fold, creating *The Cave* with Double Fine Productions. It drew comparison to *Maniac Mansion*, leaning on concepts from the 1987 release in an attempt to explore an idea he had on the backburner for almost 20 years. An interesting release, it started Gilbert on the road to creating *Thimbleweed Park*.

and then think up a few locations. We start with a synopsis, essentially a one-pager for the story, and then all of the details in-between it come together. While we are figuring the details of the story, at the same time we are adding rooms to the game and we are figuring out the puzzles. If you do that right, it is all just one big interwoven experience. Narrative gives puzzles their purpose. It isn't just a locked door that you find a key for, it's a locked door that I need to get behind because there is this amazing thing behind it that you already know about. That pushes everything forward as a single entity.

Adventure games are kind of a dying art, do you think modern players are up for the challenge?

If we look at modern players, they still want challenge – they still love to be challenged and wrestle with a problem – but what they don't want to be is confused and frustrated. A lot of the puzzle design in *Thimbleweed Park* is really about making challenging, meaty puzzles that are not frustrating… that are not confusing.

What's changed, then?

I think a little bit of it is just that gamers have matured. We now have a gaming audience that is millions upon millions of people bigger than we had back then, and players think about things a little differently. You had the hardcore crowd, that played point-and-click games back in the day, and they sort of played things a certain way. For them, if a puzzle was confusing, that was *okay*; it was *good* in a way that it was confusing.

One thing I've learned is that when you are designing puzzles you have to be very clear with what you want. Be clear about what you are expecting people to do, which is very different from telling them what to do. It's very different than leading somebody around and [saying]: 'Go here, click on that, and now do this'. But just being clear, saying: 'Hey, I want a rusty old bottle' and when you go back and talk to them again, they will tell you a *second* time that they *want that* rusty old bottle. That just didn't happen in *Monkey Island*, there were a few very frustrating encounters in it. We were playing *Monkey Island 2* [on team] about a year ago and, I remember Kate Capsize wants you to go out and find something, but she only tells you that *once*. Never again will she just tell you what she wants; it drove me crazy!

So, in a sense, it isn't about making the game and puzzles easier, but making sure they are easier to parse?

Exactly. Design wise, we are better about signposting; making it clear where you are in the world and what type of things you are likely to find. These kinds of things just help the more modern adventure gamer – the type of adventure gamer that loves *Firewatch*, loves *Gone Home*, and loves *Kentucky Route Zero*. It's these kinds of things that make the point-and-click adventure game accessible to them while some of the old games kind of really aren't.

So you see a parallel between games like *Firewatch* and *Gone Home* with your adventure games then? They are lazily considered to be 'walking simulators' in today's climate…

Oh yeah, absolutely. I absolutely see games like *Firewatch* and *Gone Home* as just an extension of them. The LucasArts adventure games were obviously very narrative focused. I don't even think you can have an adventure game without the narrative – then it would just be a bunch of random puzzles. Narrative gives the puzzles meaning. A game like *Firewatch*, while it isn't very puzzle intensive, does have a really strong narrative.

The other thing *Firewatch* and *Gone Home* do – and that *Kentucky Route Zero* does extremely well – is they are really good at establishing this sense of place. I think *Maniac Mansion* was very good at that; you got to know that house and you came to love that house. *Monkey Island* as well, it just had this amazing sense of place… you just felt that this place was *real*. That was a part of their charm, and I think *Firewatch*, *Gone Home* and *Kentucky Route Zero* do a really good job of that too. I think the 'Walking Simulator' moniker is a little bit of a slam and I think it is unfair.

Don't modern action-adventure games – *Uncharted* and *Tomb Raider* – also have that same sense of strong narrative drive behind them?

I don't personally enjoy those games. I call that entire genre of game 'Press A To Continue' games. Because it's like: you see something, press A; you see something, press A; you see something else and, oh, wow, I get to press A fast now. It kind of gets back to that sense of place, right? I think with [my] adventure games, I've always thought that the main character of an adventure game is the world.

It's about being able to explore a world, at your own pace and go anywhere that you want to go, as opposed to being on little rails. Now we are going to go to the train scene, now we are going to go to the blimp scene, and then maybe I'm going to get a choice and I can either go to the boat or the car scene after that; but It's always on these kinds of rails with these sorts of games. With *Thimbleweed Park* you just explore, you get to wander around and poke your head in places you shouldn't, and do all those fun kinds of things.

Your LucasArts classics – and the same can be said about *Thimbleweed Park* – have this magic to their visual design. Is that missing from these modern action-adventure games?

Whenever you are [building] realistic looking games you lose a sense of the artistry. Because, in a way, they are very obsessed with simulating reality. But with something like this – it's like when you're reading a graphic novel or when you're watching an anime – they can have a real sense of style, right? You can look at a Pixar movie and instantly recognise that it's as a Pixar movie because they have a style with all of their films. It's the same with 8-bit games, there's a certain *style* to them. One of the things I've always thought, across my entire career, is that a game should have such a unique style that I could show a screenshot and you instantly can go, 'oh, that's *Thimbleweed Park*' or 'yeah, that's *Monkey Island*'.

Do you believe the 8-bit style, if done correctly, is essentially timeless?

There is a timelessness to all really great art. If it has got a certain kind of artisticness to it… we look at paintings that are 700 years old and we still think they are amazing. If you look at a modern 3D game 20 years from now, it's going to look really weird. If you look at the first 3D games that were made – in the late nineties – you kind of look at it and go 'urgh'.

Do you see *Thimbleweed Park* as the catalyst for a new breed of old-school inspired adventure games?

Yeah, maybe; that's really hard to know. Our hope with *Thimbleweed Park* is that there are people who have never played a point-and-click adventure game before that want to play it. To me, that's the more interesting audience. The hardcore



TURN TO PAGE **106** TO DISCOVER WHY MANIAC MANSION WAS SUCH A GAME CHANGER FOR THE ADVENTURE GAME GENRE.

point-and-click players are going to love this game – I have no doubt that they are going to love this game – but for me the bigger challenge is to take people who have only played *Firewatch*, who loved the narrative, and to tell them 'hey, you know what? This is actually a really good game and you're really going to like this as well'. To me, that's the bigger challenge in all of this.

Thimbleweed Park is set in 1987, the year of _Maniac Mansion_'s release; is it set in the real world or another fictional version of it?
Any time you do a period piece you're not really drawing from the period, you're drawing from people's perceptions of the period. Even something like *Stranger Things* – and you know, I lived through that period, I was those kids – and I look at that show, and while they nail the important things, but they forgot all the shitty things. There's a little bit of that anytime you do a period piece. This game, unlike something like *Monkey Island*, or even *Maniac Mansion*, this game is set in the real world; it isn't a weird alternate reality. We have fun with it, we have fun with events that are going on at the time and things like that, much to the our translators… most of the events we are referencing are clearly American events and they are like 'nobody knows what that is!' That's always fun.

Do you ever get political?
Not really, although we do have a building with all 27 amendments of the constitution inside. If you are one of those people who love to click through everything, you can find out about all 27 constitution amendments; it's a civics class right here.

We shouldn't expect any satirical Donald Trump references then?
No, he's not [in *Thimbleweed Park*]; but he could probably learn something from playing it.

Is there any game project from the last 20 years that you wished you had thought of?
I'd say the *Stanley Parable*. That's a game where I just, you know, ten minutes into the game I was like 'oh shit – I should have thought of this, I *wish* I could have made this game'. So I think that's kind of the one. There are a lot of games where I appreciate pieces of them – where I go, oh that was really neat, that was really clever – but *The Stanley Parable* as a whole, I'm like, 'oh, I should have done this!'

Do you have a favourite _Monkey Island_ game?
This is what I often say about *The Secret Of Monkey Island* and *Monkey Island 2: Monkey Island 2* is a better game, but *The Secret Of Monkey Island* is a better designed game; those two games are special to me for different reasons.

Has there been any movement on securing the IP rights to _Monkey Island_ from Disney?
[Chuckles] Not in any meaningful way, no.

Does that frustrate you?
I wouldn't say it is frustrating. I have a lot of other things to do, I have a lot of other things I'm interested in doing, so I wouldn't say it is like the one thing – like, I do this or everything is screwed up. Its not frustrating, necessarily; disappointing, would maybe be a better word.

Would you return to a Kickstarter campaign to help fund a future point-and-click adventure game?
I love point-and-click games; I love storytelling and I like the way point-and-click games do storytelling. I mean, if [*Thimbleweed Park*] does well, I would just love to go off and do another one. [But] If I could do it without crowdfunding, I would probably do it without crowdfunding.

There's a little too much of this, like, 'open door', where everybody sees in and can see what you are doing. That can be really nice and I've really enjoyed the process of working with the backers and sharing everything with them – it's been a wonderful experience and I would not trade that at all. But there is something to being able to just go, 'you know what, this just isn't working, let's just throw it out and start over with something'. That is very natural in any creative process, but you can't do that with a crowdfunding project – or if you do, you spend a lot of time having to explain why you are doing that stuff.

It sounds like a completely different experience to developing games back in the eighties.
That's because nobody cared! Not just working back in the eighties either, but even working on a game like *The Cave*, which was the last big game that I worked on. Nobody cared when we threw out entire sections of that game because we didn't think they were working and rebuilt them from scratch, nobody cared. Where, had that been a Kickstarter thing, if we threw out those sections, somebody would go, "oh my god; no, no, no, the witch is my favourite character! You can't get rid of the witch. This sucks! I'm going on Reddit!' [Laughter] You just have to kind of deal with that…

We've had a relatively good experience with backers. They haven't turned on us yet, but a lot of that is down to communication – you have to communicate *a lot*.

We don't mean to be rude, but, well, you fight like a Dairy Farmer.
What? No, I don't even remember the insults! [Laughter] I really don't; it's really embarrassing for me, because the fans remember them all. They come up to me and just hit me with one, expecting me to just hit them back with an answer and I'm just like, sorry, I have no idea what to say[laughter].



WITH THIMBLEWEED PARK YOU JUST EXPLORE, YOU GET TO WANDER AROUND AND POKE YOUR HEAD IN PLACES YOU SHOULDN'T





TURN TO PAGE
86
TO DISCOVER WHY RON GILBERT LOVES WORLD OF WARCRAFT.



■ *Thimbleweed Park* features more than 16,000 lines of dialogue, taking a monstrous five weeks to record with the various voice actors that feature in the game

■ *Thimbleweed Park* had 12 staff during the peak of its two year development, a huge contrast to the three that worked on *Maniac Mansion*, and the seven for *Secret Of Monkey Island*





INJUSTICE™ 2

BUILDING A BETTER BRAWLER

ACCESSIBILITY AND BRUTALITY CLASH IN INJUSTICE 2, NETHERREALM'S MOST AMBITIOUS GAME TO DATE

Damien Wayne is on the business end of a professional beating. Born into a life of assassins, raised in an environment of heroism, punished with a batarang to the abdomen; it sure is difficult being a child of Gotham. An intricate web of blows break his bones, his limp body ricocheting heavily off of the walls of Arkham Asylum; his screams may echo in its chambers, but through it all you'll swear you can hear the faint hint of muted cheers and manic button bashing worlds away.

This beat down is provided courtesy of a Batman that has been forced far from the realms of reasonable discourse. If the Justice League Of America siding with an authoritarian Superman wasn't enough of an injustice for Bruce, Robin slitting the throat of an Arkham inmate certainly was. "You're dead to me," Bruce soberly informs his son, before laying down a destructive, precise combo of strikes that leads to an energetic, imaginative show of force – it isn't long before Damian finds himself catapulted into the clouds by a tow cable, the Batwing peppering his torso with hundreds of bullets that propel him back to ground. The energy emanating out of this battle is electrifying – the violence palpable and the brutality strangely sensual. *Injustice 2* is *Batman Vs Superman* done right; deliberate aggression presented with purposeful provocation.

There is only one studio on the planet that could build something as audacious as *Injustice 2*, and **games™** is knocking on its front door; peering behind the spectacle of savagery for an exclusive insight into NetherRealm's unwavering commitment to tearing the DC Universe apart, one ligament at a time.

From the outside, Chicago's NetherRealm Studios looks, well, entirely unexceptional; a testament to the uninspired American architecture that can so commonly exist on the fringes of a major city. Lost within a lot of large office complexes and warehouses – behind the walls of an unassuming, foreclosed bank – is something truly priceless: an unrivalled, institutional knowledge of the fighting game genre.

NetherRealm may have emerged in 2010, but it was founded as Midway Games Chicago in 1988. Many of the staff are industry veterans, shepherds of the *Mortal Kombat* franchise since its debut back in 1992, joined by impassioned new blood eager to bring innovation to a genre that has long struggled to break away from cautious, antiquated iteration cycles.

For close to three decades, NetherRealm has been micromanaging ultra-violence. And that, as far as studio founder and *Mortal Kombat* co-creator Ed Boon is concerned, it is quite the reputation to hold onto. "That's kind of what we do here," he chuckles, as affable as ever, "it's one of our things."

But in 2017, NetherRealm will become known for something else entirely. Building off of the surprising success of Injustice: *Gods Among Us*, this May 2017 sequel will attempt to further distance itself from the blood, brutalities and fatalities that *Mortal Kombat* is so revered for; to further bridge the gap between competitive and casual players, and in a way so many other fighting games have failed to do so in the past.

The focus is on frictionless combat and the returning, ridiculous super assaults – *Injustice*'s version of *Fatalities*. Easily-executable moves that lean heavily on promoting accessibility to let you live out your dream of punching Damien Wayne's smug smile right off of his face and into the atmosphere, through the walls of famous Metropolis landmarks and into the jaws of giant, mutated monstrosities of the sea. If you've ever harboured a hatred for any particular DC hero or villain, you better clasp your hands and pray that they make it into *Injustice 2*'s expansive roster– the largest to ever feature in a NetherRealm game, with *24* already revealed and with more still to come.

NetherRealm wants to breath new life into the fighting genre. It wants to ensure that *Injustice 2* side steps all of the ongoing problems Capcom has encountered with *Street Fighter V* (since its somewhat messy launch in 2015) and, perhaps more importantly, it wants its latest to be more relevant – fresh – than *Mortal Kombat*. To do that, all it needed was one truly great idea; one great idea and the rest would fall nicely into place.

But it's hardly ever as easy as that now, is it?

"We've always felt that with any new sequel we develop it needs a new thing that has never been done before," says Boon, noting NetherRealm's commitment to constructive, reflective game creation. "It needs something that will make players say, 'Oh, *oh*, I've never seen that before'. *This* is about as dramatic as of a thing we can do with these characters."

The '*this*' the NetherRealm studio head is referring to would be the inclusion of a ridiculous, reactive gear system that doesn't just alter cosmetic stylings of your favourite combative superheroes, but their base stats and abilities too. On the surface, it sounds like a natural evolution of *Mortal Kombat X*'s Stance system, but the reality is that it has a far more pertinent impact on moment-to-moment play. The gear you collect after each and every battle can affect well, just about *everything*; maximum hit points, the moves available to any given character on the roster, to the raw damage numbers you can dish out on an unsuspecting foe both off and online.

> **"WE'VE ALWAYS FELT THAT WITH ANY NEW SEQUEL WE DEVELOP IT NEEDS A NEW THING THAT HAS NEVER BEEN DONE BEFORE"**

If you're a fighting fan – if you remember the chaos wrought onto *Street Fighter X Tekken*'s game balance thanks to that bloody gem system or *Soulcalibur IV*'s garish weapon system – then it's only too likely that your buttocks clenched at the mere mention of such a system invading *Injustice 2*. Truth be told, speaking with various members of the development team, it sounds as if they had a very similar reaction to the concept – though perhaps for a different reason entirely.

This is a sentiment echoed by lead designer and studio veteran John Edwards, who notes that while the Gear system was a huge want and dream from the design team, they questioned whether they had it in them following the monumental task of getting critically acclaimed *Mortal Kombat X* out the door. "Dream, nightmare; same thing. Panic attacks, sleepless nights, but, yeah, you know how it is!" Edwards laughs, before giving us an insight into the earliest days of the project. "At the beginning, a lot of us were really freaked out. This type of system hasn't really been done in fighting games – or even when it has been attempted, it hasn't been this fully [developed]. It's daunting to even think about."

"We stumbled out of the gate a little bit [and] we wondered if it was just too much for us to handle," Edwards says, with Barron jumping in and adding with a smile, "there were a lot of failures early on, but that was good; we got the crap out of the way."

The attitude amongst the staff quickly changed, it seems, as the picture became clearer on the task at hand. "As things started to come together – and as people could see where this thing was going – it became one of those things that just started taking off like a rocket," says Edwards. "This was one of those systems that was hard to start up and get realised, »





NetherRealm is building on the success of *Mortal Kombat X* as it approaches *Injustice 2*, a game that finds glee in chaos and destruction, whilst still maintaining a mechanically solid fighting game beneath it all.



Injustice 2 truly feels like it is compatible with casual and competitive players. It's easy enough to grasp the basics, and enjoy the experience, but underneath it all is a surprisingly deep and solid fighting experience.



CUSTOMISATION CONCERNS

BREAKING THE DCU APART

"If we didn't have this relationship with DC built up from previous games, it pretty much would have been impossible to do *Injustice 2*," Edwards tells us, which isn't surprising considering how much freedom the game gives you over the look and power sets of each DC character that makes the roster cut.

"There was a ton of concepting," says Barron, noting how difficult it was for NetherRealm to find the balance between a character looking "freaking cool" and moving "a little too far from what Batman would wear."

"We were walking that line constantly," Barron continues. "Making judgement calls of, 'yeah, Batman would wear that' whilst [making] gear look cool enough so that when you put that cowl on you're like, 'yeah, I'm fucking badass'. It has to look different enough that it's obvious, but there's a line where it looks wacky. It was a line [we] had to walk constantly. Finding enough variety… that was a big challenge."

This is a sentiment echoed by Ed Boon, who goes on to clarify: "We worked very hard in terms of its implementation. We don't want you to change Batman so much that all of a sudden he's Wonder Woman or anything like that. It's about finding that balance of giving the player personalisation and creativity, but staying true to the course of that character."



As with *Injustice: Gods Among Us*, there's much fun to be found in utilising the destructible environments to create some truly stunning scenarios of super hero domination.

NetherRealm is proud of the company's heritage, displaying relics from its past in plain sight all throughout the studio's halls.

IN CONVERSATION WITH ED BOON

MORTAL KOMBAT CO-CREATOR ON THREE DECADES OF ULTRA-VIOLENCE

HOW HAS THE FIGHTING GENRE EVOLVED SINCE *MORTAL KOMBAT*'S DEBUT?

While the fundamentals are two people beating each other up – in a confined space with special moves, that has remained somewhat the same – but it's ten times deeper of a fighting mechanic now than it was in the first *Mortal Kombat*. The presentation and the other options that you can do with the different modes and online play is completely different beast, but the fundamentals are still there.

THE INDUSTRY HAS CHANGED SO MUCH IN THE PAST 25 YEARS, BUT DO YOU THINK IT HAS CHANGED FOR THE BETTER?

It's a different job now. The first three *Mortal Kombat* games I was the only programmer. For the first game, we had just four people working on the game. Now, I haven't written software in years. There is so much content to be created; story content, gameplay, art, graphics, animations, tech, it's all so big! My full time job is steering the overall direction, to make sure everything complements each another. We have amazingly talented experts in every single facet, doing the micro-details of it; orchestrating all of that is my job.

DO YOU MISS CODING?

I do, I do, yeah I do. But everybody has to do something, that's just the reality of it.

IF, BACK AT THE RELEASE OF *MK1*, WE HAD THIS GLOBAL ONLINE ESPORTS INFRASTRUCTURE IN PLACE, HOW DO YOU THINK YOU'D PLACE IN A TOURNAMENT IF YOU WERE TO ENTER?

Oh, last [laughs]. There's no way that I'm even in the vicinity of these players. It's funny that when *Mortal Kombat* first came out, I was in my twenties and I still had my vision and my reflexes and I could go to an arcade and beat somebody up and two weeks later I couldn't – people who spend eight or ten hours playing the game constantly, I don't have that kind of free time. So you have that very brief shining moment when you can kick a 20-year-old's ass at the game and then that's gone.

WHAT'S IN THE FUTURE FOR NETHEREALM?

When we finished *Injustice: Gods Among Us*, we were kind of like, well, what do we do with *Mortal Kombat* now? We always have little different ideas that we are working on and then, at some point when we finish a game and we clear our heads, it some how becomes clear what the next step is. We have notes that I've written down a bunch of stuff and ideas that we want to try but nothing is concrete. We certainly haven't planned the whole next game and stuff like that out, these games take such a huge effort to do – it can be very draining.

IS YOUR FAVOURITE DC CHARACTER IN THE GAME?

He is! The Flash! The Flash has always been my favourite DC character. He is my favourite DC character and I love the TV show that is on now and when I was a kid I used to read the comics, he was my favourite one.



The team's studio is actually built inside an old bank, with the team using the isolated bank vault to record audio and the bone-crushing sound effects without disruption.

The sound of bones breaking in *Injustice* and *Mortal Kombat*? That's actually the team crushing common vegetables, such as celery and carrots, in an isolated sound chamber.

Nine weeks of motion capture were needed to get the story and combat posing correct, utilising a state of the art mo-cap studio and an array of accurately weighted weapons. And yes, we can confirm, Mileena's sai from *MKX* are very, very sharp.

but once it did it was just like, look, look at how this permeates through the game! I think that's the biggest thing that we've accomplished on this game compared to our previous (and also awesome) games, for sure."

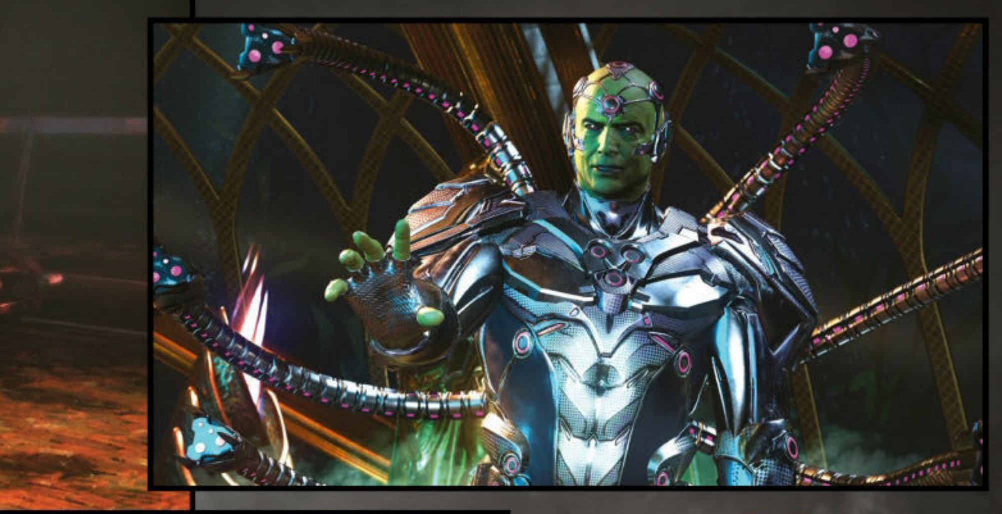
The ambition behind the Gear system was two fold: to further bridge the gap between competitive and casual play, and to expand on the rewards systems that NetherRealm has always tried so diligently to implement in *Mortal Kombat* and *Injustice* over the years. "This is just the ultimate version of that," says Edwards of the Gear system. "Everything is geared towards keeping players involved, giving people things like goals that they can strive for, and also supporting artistically variety and adding new strategy into individual fights. The gear system, essentially, does all of these things perfectly."

While the team is clearly, and rightfully, very proud of the Gear system, we also came away with the sense that there is an undercurrent of trepidation surrounding its implementation; fear that members of the competitive community may misunderstand NetherRealm's intentions, or that casual players may write it off as a gimmick.

And it's true, to an extent. The Gear system *is* something of a gimmick, but it's a damn good one. Boon is quick to note that this isn't something the studio just pulled out of thin air but an idea that has been gestating for close to a decade, with NetherRealm waiting for it to click into place in its own hearts and minds. "You know what, the original pitch [for Gear] was something very different and we discussed it a few times with several of our games," Boon considers. "At one point we were discussing it as far back as *Mortal Kombat 9*, [but] we never thought it was the right time or what the right implementation of it could be. But as we kept thinking about it… *Injustice 2* was just the right time."

In a sense, it's easy to wonder whether or not *Injustice 2* in its current form would have existed without the success of *Destiny*, *Overwatch* and *The Division* in recent years; shooters that have taken the lessons learned from the MMO space and applied them to a different genre entirely. As it exists now, the hybrid-RPG model infused with loot boxes and a myriad of gear to aspire towards is the best method of improving player retention and enjoyment – if anything, it's surprising *Injustice 2* is the first fighting game to go all in with it.

The progression system essentially allows for an ever updating and shifting meta game, without disrupting the all-important underlying balance. Every activity in the game rewards a randomised gear drop, as well as XP for your currently selected character. The gear can be equipped onto different body parts – differing from hero to hero – which brings small percentage boosts to aspects like health, defence and damage, with the key stats and numbers presented clearly and plainly for all to see. This brings, in essence,





> WE DON'T WANT YOU TO CHANGE BATMAN SO MUCH THAT ALL OF A SUDDEN HE'S WONDER WOMAN OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT

a clear degree of longevity and progression to the game outside of the monotony of story-replays and long waits for game-updating DLC.

In terms of XP, characters can level to a current cap of 20 – dictating their base stats – while the gear you collect then delivering broad, impactful customisation. Not only does this mean that you're able to dramatically tweak the look of some of the most famous superheroes of all time, but drag them away from their own fighting game archetypal brackets and create something interesting and fresh with each and every one of them to better suit your preferred playing style.

It's here where the question of balance begins to rear its head. How can the game *possibly* be balanced in competitive play with so many modifications and shifting variables to the basic meta? "We have lots of ways to deal with that," says Edwards, hoping to dispel fears. "For non-ranked matches, when you are matched up with somebody, you each have the option to not have stats be affected and you'll just get the visuals – you can look as cool as you want to and just show off how badass you are without worrying about the stats."

As for the shifting character level, NetherRealm has, again, found a way to balance this out. "We don't want to limit so people can't play their level 20 characters against other people's level 1 characters – that would just make up all of these different, smaller buckets of players online," says Edwards, revealing that the lower level character is essentially boosted to the higher level, with specific gear stats staying as they are.

While the sounds perfectly agreeable for matchmaking and messing around with your friends online, it also raises a question of competitive play. Tournaments and eSports have been instrumental in the ongoing success of many game genres – fighting included – and Edwards is quick to assure us that gear and character level won't affect competitive play. "For things like ranked, we essentially just disable stats and you have just the visuals. We are very cognisant that we have hard-core fighting game guys and casual players, and everyone wants to experience the gear system and we wanted to find a way so that all these people feel like they are getting equal rewards, but if they wanted to be able to play in a more competitive environment that will be handled across the board."

Oh, and the biggest unanswered question? No, you won't be able to purchase gear, gear regeneration tokens or loot boxes that can drop throughout play – when NetherRealm says this is a reward-based system, well, it means it. "Those are all reward based in-game. There is no way to essentially purchase gear in game. All of the gear, the stats, any of those things, all of that stuff is earned in-game only."

Ultimately, the gear system and the abundant changes it brings to play doesn't harm *Injustice 2*'s core moment-to-moment action, but enhances it. It takes the fundamentals of the fighting game genre and gives »

BALANCING ACCESSIBILITY WITH COMPLEXITY

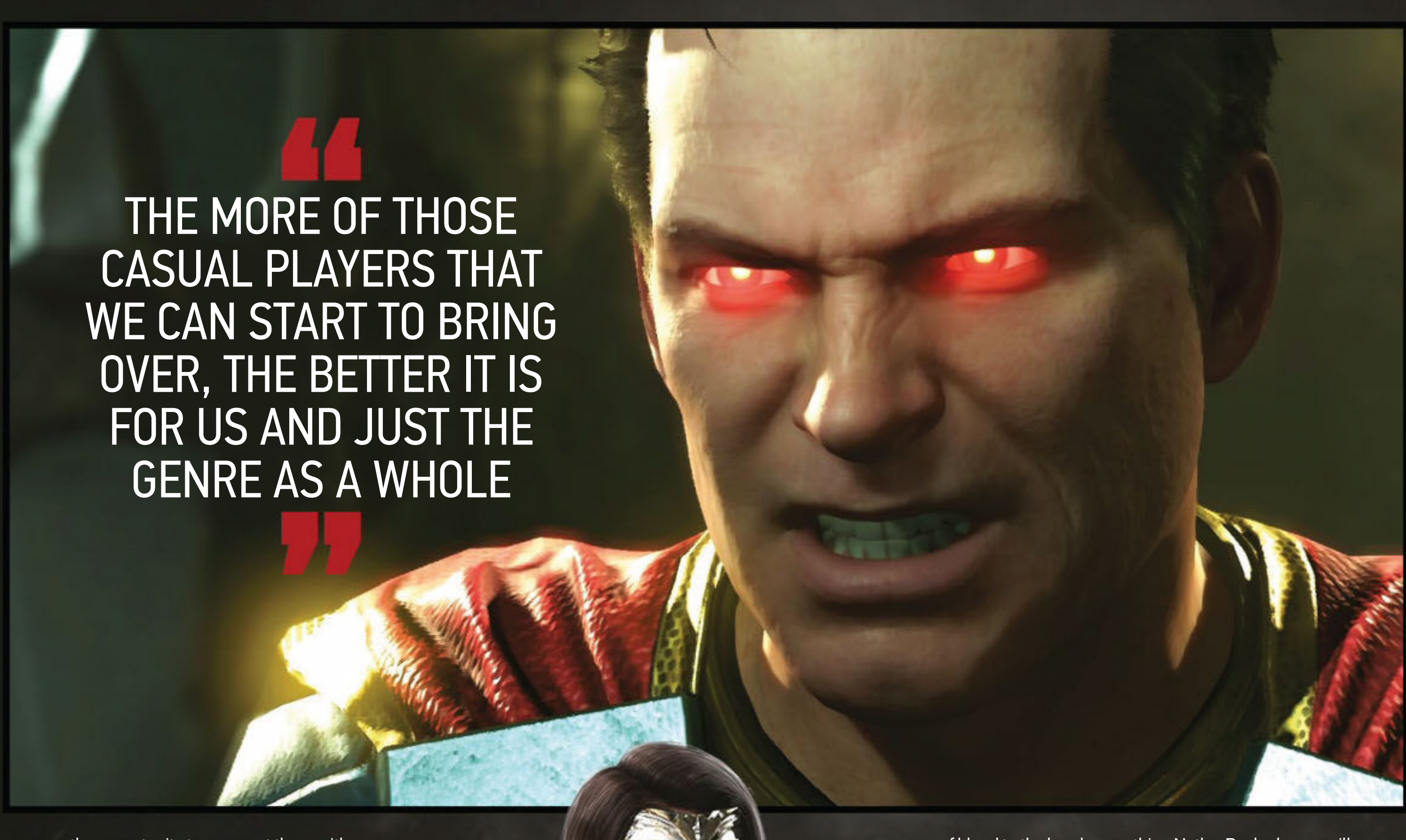
JOHN EDWARDS ON DESIGNING FOR THE FIVE PER CENT

"Every gameplay decision that we make we have to weigh against, 'yes that sounds super cool for that group of people but how's it going to affect this group of people?' We try to hit as much in the middle of that as possible. We try to leave in things that are mechanically difficult – things that we would say are more of an advanced player type of thing – the casual guys, until they get to a certain level, won't even know that those things exist. But it doesn't matter for them; they have so many cool things that they can do anyway that they don't even know that they are missing this thing up here, right?

Every game we have worked on has always been a focus for everybody, to understand that we aren't making a game for *this* five per cent of people or for *this* five per cent of people, but we are trying to make it for everybody that wants to explore the world of DC or *Mortal Kombat*.

Well, it's definitely something we try to do. Within ourselves we have a number of discussions and sometimes debates that somebody will design a feature that's a little bit too hardcore, and my thing is always, 'What kind of percentage of people are going to enjoy this?' If it's five per cent, we're not doing it. Or if it's five per cent and it really takes up a lot of work from us, we're not going to do it. We like to bury things for those tournament players, but at the top level if someone can't pick up a controller and start having fun right off the bat, not everyone has 17-year-old kid catlike reflexes and so if we give somebody out of that demographic the game and they can start playing and having fun then we know we're in the right track."

■ The development team wouldn't be drawn on how many DLC characters it has planned, but Himmerick would tease that "the third and the fourth one" were being motion captured in the coming weeks.



you the opportunity to augment them with your own expression and personal flavour. If anything, these genre games are all about crafting and honing your skills around a character that you feel is uniquely your own, *Injustice 2* simply gives you the tools to truly make it so.

It's with all of this then, that NetherRealm attempts what so many have tried (and ultimately failed) to do: bring accessibility to a genre that so commonly separates casual and competitive players into two separate camps. It's been a perpetual problem; streamline controls or high-level execution too much and the competitive players will grow disinterested, alternatively, make it too difficult to make the "cool shit happen" – as Barron puts it – and the casual fans that just like to mash buttons and see results will back away promptly in fear.

"It's the toughest part of combat design," muses Edwards. "There is a fine line between mashing buttons and cool things coming out versus mashing particular things and the things I want to come out are coming out. That's one of the things we are very cognisant of, making sure that is as easy as it possibly can be, without making it so broad and easy that you have no fine control over the things you want to do."

There are so many different things that factor into what makes somebody good at fighting games and, the truth is, the real barrier isn't execution but understanding. Understanding each character at a granular level, recognising the underlying, interlacing systems and knowing how to best exploit them. The problem is, that takes time to learn; time many players simply won't afford the game past the initial rush of blood to the head, something NetherRealm hopes will change as the compulsive fun and want of loot boxes fall into play.

"I think the gear system is going to pull some of the more casual people into the more advanced level," says Barron, noting that playing online will ensure players see loot that they aspire towards, thus starting the cycle of ravenous play sessions and steady growth.

"One of the things about our fighting games is keeping casual players engaged long enough that they start to learn," reaffirms Edwards. "The longer we can keep those casual players engaged with fun stuff they will just learn as they go; our hope is that [some] people might just get this one little insight into fighting games, right, because they were around doing something else for such a long amount of time that that's the thing that hooks them into fighting games."

"The more of those casual players that we can start to bring over, the better it is for us and just the genre as a whole… it is a very tough genre to get other people into. It's a tough line to walk, but I think we get better and better at it as we go. We are constantly trying to introduce new gameplay things that kind of smooth out some that transition."

In comparison to *Injustice 2*, *Mortal Kombat* can be viewed as something of a quaint, adorable, anachronism – a throwback to an easier time, where shock value alone was enough to entice players. But with *Injustice 2*, NetherRealm is attempting to push forward the genre with one of the slickest, mechanically enticing and engaging fighting games seen this generation.



16 STEPS TO YOOKA-LAYLEE'S 3D PLATFORMING REVIVAL

PLAYTONIC'S MANAGING DIRECTOR AND CREATIVE LEAD **GAVIN PRICE** TALKS US THROUGH THE PROCESS OF MAKING THE INDEPENDENT TEAM'S FIRST GAME AND HOW IT IS SOWING THE SEEDS FOR THE FUTURE

PUTTING CHARACTERS FIRST

01 For Playtonic, as much as the team had established in their days at Rare, the characters are the first step to success. "We had to nail them technically right and make sure they were giving us creative freedom to come up with a wealth of ideas off the back of who they are, what they are and what they can do. Luckily we've got Steve Mayles, the character artist, on board who has been doing this his whole career and doing it fantastically well, and Chris Sutherland as programmer and they work so well with each other. It's amazing watching them bounce off each other. And they both align to the idea that character control is key, that takes precedence over trying to have an animation last a certain length of time because it looks nicer."



HAVING AN UNDERDOG HERO

02 Interestingly, a great amount of iteration and character concepting went into landing on *Yooka and Laylee*. "Steve was busy coming up with tons of different ideas. He started off with some kind of more naturally heroic-looking animals and animals that are a bit more naturally heroic and we thought 'actually we always like being the daft underdog'. It plays better to our strengths and for a storyline, I think it's nicer to see an everyday man, even in chameleon form, be the hero, not some kind of big, v-shaped beast of whatever." And what could have been? "Tiger was very early one of the things and he just looked like a born hero and we don't want a born hero, we want the players to turn them into the hero."

THINKING ABOUT TWO LEADS, NOT ONE

03 Importantly, according to Price, Playtonic wasn't just thinking about how one character would work in its game. It knew from the start it would have a relationship at the heart of the game, perhaps even a combative one. "What works for us is having two characters being controlled at once. That gives you so much creative freedom for them to bounce off each other, be completely different characters. One of them comes at a situation from one angle, the other one another. They're almost antagonists to each other. They shouldn't be friends in certain ways, but they kind of are. The two-character setup as well as their innate abilities being born from the types of animals they are." »





FINDING PERSONALITY IN MOVEMENT

04 What really helps to define a character for Playtonic, however, is how they move. "We try to inject their natural personalities into their movement. For example, most 3D platformers have a ground pound move and this one sees Yooka do the jumping up, he then crouches into a ball and Laylee flies and smacks down into him to create the pound. If you give it a lot of thought that actually totally reflects their character relationship. In that situation he's the support guy and Laylee is the one doing the explosive action and doesn't really care about Yooka's safety during the move. It's fun to try, and a challenge for Steve that he always seems to pass with flying colours, to find the ways to animate these characteristics and personalities too, without sacrificing the mechanical gameplay feeling."



ECONOMY OF DESIGN

05 Something that this team has been carrying with it from its earliest experiences developing games on the SNES was that sometimes less is more and snappy control is better than smooth movement. "Steve is, no pun intended, one of these rare artists where he actually wants it to be gameplay lead first, not dictating that the character animation lasts so long, so the move lasts this long. He wants the game to be snappy. He's really got used to that. I could listen to them waffle on and laugh about the old days with each other, right back to the *Donkey Kong Country* games. Technical limitations meant that Steve was passing Chris an animation which was perhaps 50 frames long and Chris was like, 'to fit it in memory it's gone down to three'. And I think Steve, just early on, saw how technical limitations in the past made for smarter choices design wise and benefitted the game."

CONSTRAINTS ARE GOOD

06 In this respect, Playtonic has learnt that sometimes working with limited resources can lead to interesting solutions and that's something this team continues to believe in. "Quite often I see a lot of content, it seems to be answering a question that no one has ever asked, which is the term we use in the office. Whereas if you give yourselves a challenge, you put a lot more thought into it and actually design is the intelligent search for the best solution. You naturally design something better, I think, by having to overcome a challenge rather than just saying it can be anything, there are no limits on it. Ask ten people and you'll probably get the same result come back."





All of the characters in this game have been created with an eye on how they might be used again in the future. Playtonic is building up its own gaming universe



HAVING FANS AS TEAM MEMBERS

08 A big change for this group of veteran developers is that it has hired in a complement of younger faces to bolster its ranks (a direct result of such a successful Kickstarter campaign for its first game). Thankfully, they were also fans of this group's previous work and have offered a fans' perspective on the game. "There were emails going back and forth between Chris Sutherland and Grant Kirkhope [composer] saying 'how on earth did we do this, what was it?' The younger guys were telling us when we'd got it wrong. They were like 'I grew up playing your games'. These are some core fans who joined us and when we were making them, they were playing them. They were able to tell us when we'd hit the nail on the head with any aspect or maybe they'd say 'maybe you don't realise, but as a fan of the game this is what we liked about something'. It helped us align a lot of our thinking as did having 70,000 plus bosses backing us on Kickstarter, telling us through discussions all the time."

EVOLVING WITHOUT CHANGING

07 One of the toughest challenges for the team has been making sure it keeps up with modern advances in design without compromising the classic gameplay it's trying to honour with *Yooka-Laylee*. "That was a challenge for us, not breaking things people love while introducing things that we think have to be in there now. That might be a slightly less linear structure, we unlock worlds and you can expand worlds and players can go down their own path throughout the game, rather than having to go to level one and level two because the designer drew this line on a piece of paper that means you have to do it this way." One example of this is a tonic system. "There's a tonic system that's basically a perk system and a character called Vendi dispenses 'Play Tonics' and she'll be back in every game we ever do and she'll be dispensing these Play Tonics. It's a perk system where you equip a different tonic it will help you with a benefit to your game style."

FINDING THE RIGHT COMPROMISE

09 Pleasing everyone is virtually impossible, but Playtonic has found exploring the compromise can be fruitful. "In *Banjo-Kazooie*, whenever you collected Jiggies, Banjo stops and does a dance animation. 50 per cent of people love that and 50 per cent of people say 'no, it breaks the flow of the game having to stop'." Something in between was explored according to Price. "We came up with the emote system on the d-pad. So, at any point in time you can push a direction on the d-pad and there are different emote states and dances for Yooka and moves to do. So we thought, there you go; you can go and collect your Pagie and if you want you can carry on running around and whiz off, but if you want you can stop and trigger the dance yourself. Hopefully both sets of people, whichever preference they have, will like the solution. »

Did Nintendo pinch Playtonic's eyes for *Super Mario Odyssey*? The game's eye-based enemies in *Yooka-Laylee* actually bounce around and take over objects in the world to act as their bodies.

KEEPING AMBITIONS HUMBLE

10 "We started Playtonic out thinking we might just be six guys doing this for the rest of our lives and people might take notice of us every now again and that would have been fine so long as can keep going," says Price and that vision for what this studio could have been and what *Yooka-Laylee* might have become seems to have been kept in everyone's mind through development, grounding their experience. "But all of a sudden the Kickstarter magnified everything and shot us on a trajectory to a different place, which we don't mind being in, but we had to all of a sudden think of things in a different way. We had to see what that meant for us and what the new opportunities, if there were any, what would they be."

The Unity engine has provided a fantastic base for this game to be built on with some great lighting and excellent physics. Few 3D platformers have felt this sharp in recent memory.

ALIGNING WITH FAN THINKING

11 Price feels one of the team's greatest assets is that it and the fans of its previous games seem to be largely in agreement about what's best for *Yooka-Laylee*. "As gamers we're scarily aligned with our backers in terms of what they want us to do and what we want to do. It's like we're all singing from the same hymn sheet and it's brilliant. We've even had moments when we'll read something on our forum having just discussed something in the office and someone said exactly the same thing as us, like 'I hope this character is this and has this potential in future'. And we're like, 'is our office bugged? We've just been discussing this!' I hope it's not a case that we're predictable. I hope it's just a case that people see the same potential in stuff that we do. It's kind of cool."

LEVELS ARE EXTENSIONS OF YOUR HEROES

12 One interesting idea Price suggests is that the worlds of a game need to be expressions of the character's own strengths. As he puts it, "Levels are literally a formula for how your character moves expressed in 3D. The position of things, how something looks to catch your eye, how something looks to make an interesting path and lead you on. It's built to the mechanics of your character, so when you go into the ball-roll move it's kind of a blunt tool for going somewhere fast, so you want to ensure there's a safe, wider area for going along that. But it also means if you try and create a really platforming course and you have to be in the ball move and have to do tricky jumps, it becomes a fun, skillable challenge in itself." He compares it to a famous skill-based platforming experience. "It's almost like playing *Trials HD*. It's tricky, precise platforming and you don't normally do that while using the ball roll move."



The scale of some of the levels is very impressive. There's a lot of verticality and open space to explore and the levels can also be extended over time to reveal more challenges.

MOVE BEYOND REALITY

13 With characters and levels in place, it's the overall setting and narrative Playtonic likes to address and in this respect it feels it fell upon a great excuse to have the game be as crazy as it wanted. "We see ourselves as always wanting to do something fantastical, not grounded in reality too much. Not to be constrained by being unable to have a level on the back of a rainbow spewing unicorns if we wanted to. We could do that, because it makes sense in the world of *Yooka-Laylee* that that's possible, with the storyline we've gone down with books and grand tomes being able to contain worlds that are visitable and habitable whatever the author of those grand tomes wanted them to be. That means in the future as well it's kind of a metaphor for us as creators. Whatever we want to do we can do and we've given ourselves the plot device to do that."



REMAINING OPEN TO CHANGE

14 With this gradual growth of the game from characters to mechanics and then to levels, Playtonic has also tried to remain open to the potential of new ideas emerging or old commitments needing to be dropped. "The ball roll itself was a real physics-based ball-feeling move, but the levels, as they went larger and more developed, we thought actually you've got to travel faster than what we currently can, so we need to revisit the ball-roll move and it changed completely. As a company, we don't plan everything up from day one and say 'right, there's the game in a 1,000 page document, heads down and we'll deliver'. We kind of just look at the next few steps each time, being open to the fact that while we've got to react to a new challenge we've had with the design to come back and change something else. The inverse of that is that you come across happy experiment in the game, 'oh wow, this was pretty cool', and you build something up around that mechanic or challenge."


Yooka and Laylee were conceived and designed as a pair and their moves together have been developed with their personalities in mind.



DESIGNING LEVELS THROUGH GAME PACING

15 In terms of how levels are conceived and selected, it's all about pacing according to Price. "Initially we do have a high level point like 'this level to me is the one that feels safe and this one feels scary and tricky to find your way around'. Another level we know occurs at a point in the game where we think the player might want to kick back and relax a bit and just have a bit of fun." From there a complimentary look for the level is explored. "The visual style kind of comes off the back of that, gets interpreted by the artists one way or another and you can see recently we revealed the casino theme world and that was purely because we had a need for a level where we thought it would be just nice there, this level doesn't take itself as seriously as the others. It switches things up a bit. You're no longer getting Pagies on this level, you get currency that you then have to cash in at the casino desk, which is also the main boss of the game in a disguise."



BUILDING A UNIVERSE

16 Finally, throughout the process Playtonic has been keeping in mind what will come next. "We saw the opportunity to build something up from day one, from the ground up, which is we're going to have all of these characters and we're going to have other genres of game created by us with other characters, why shouldn't they exist in the same universe? Why shouldn't they meet each other? So every character has had to be designed with future potential in mind as well as serve a purpose in *Yooka-Laylee* and that's also the story." This then is the beginning of a new Playtonic universe. "We've not only had to do a story that fits that purpose, but also starts explaining and putting some questions in players' minds as to what is actually going on in the Playtonic universe? What could be happening next? Who are these characters and what was this hinting at that's going to happen?"

Reviews



66

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD

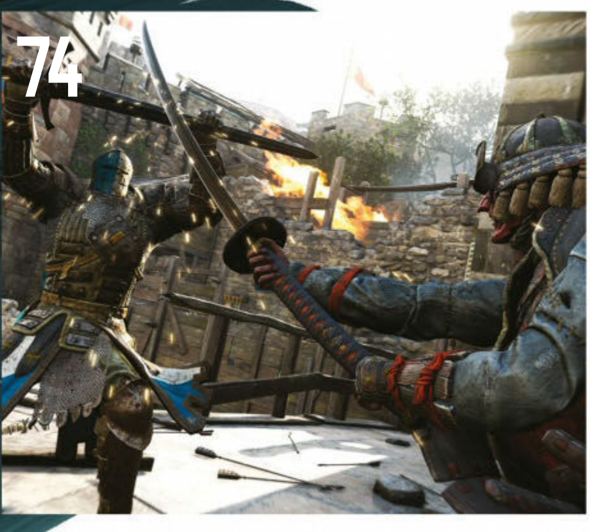
Nintendo leads off its launch of the Switch with its most beloved franchise. So does it live up to Link's illustrious heritage?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.

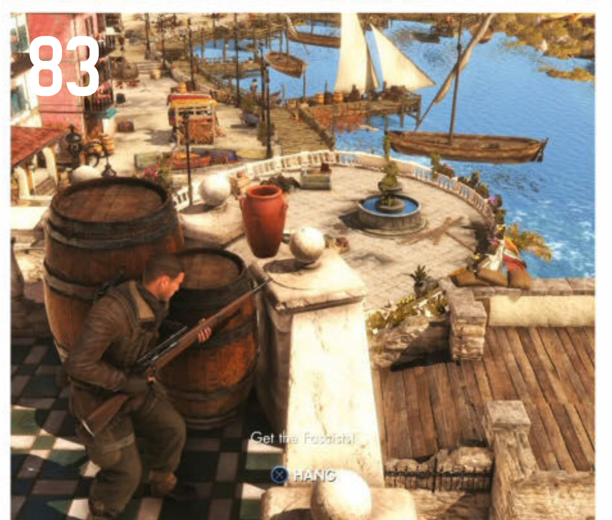












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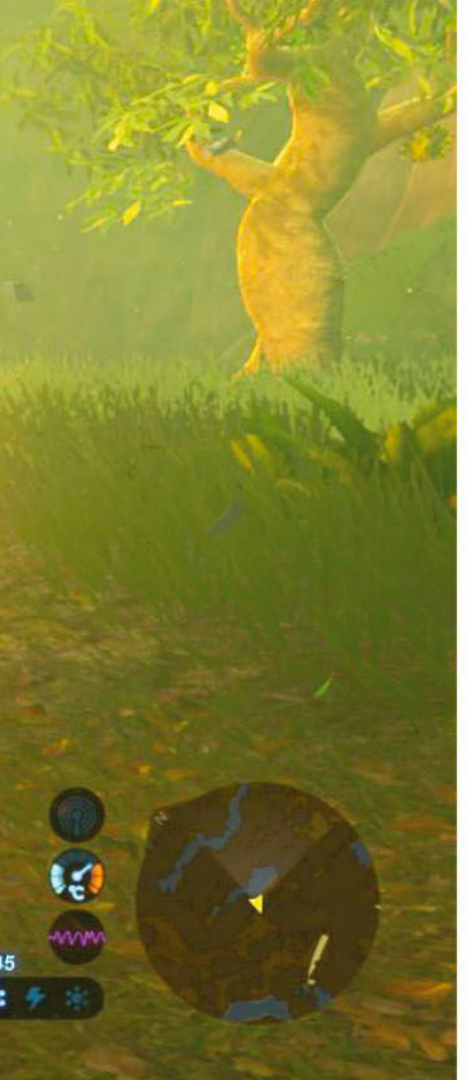

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ATTENTION TO DETAIL IS AMAZING THROUGHOUT, EVEN EXTENDING TO DIALOGUE BASED ON APPEARANCE AND PREVIOUS ACTIONS

A LINK TO THE PAST

While Nintendo might be synonymous with polish and finesse when it comes to first-party software, *Breath Of The Wild* suffers from the kind of serious performance issues seldom seen in first-party titles. We understand why – it's a game that was already ambitious for Wii U before being ported across to Nintendo's new system to hit launch – but that doesn't make it any less disappointing. Bizarrely, Switch's handheld/tabletop modes are the smoothest way to play, the 720p visuals made to look sharp and vivid on the small screen. While docked, resolution is bumped to 900p, but framerate nosedives in even the most vaguely taxing areas, to the point where just trying to turn the camera in a forest or village can cause terrible stuttering and slowdown. Wii U performance is similar to Switch's docked mode only at 720p – impressive given the nature of the game and capabilities of the hardware, but certainly not the ideal way to experience the game.





AN ADVENTURE THAT'LL MAKE YOU TINGLE

The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
OTHER FORMATS: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

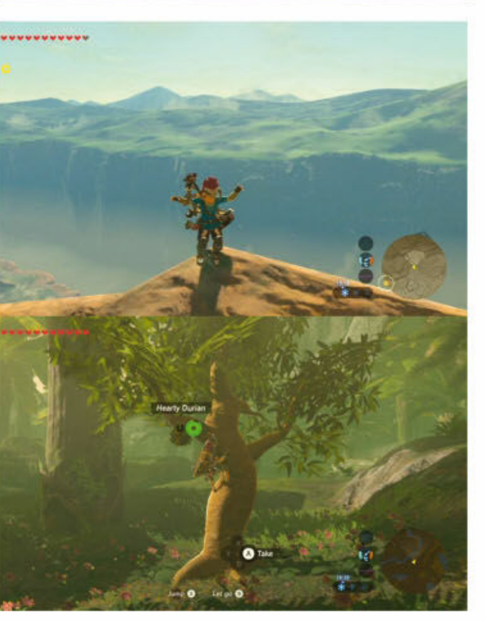
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: SKYWARD SWORD



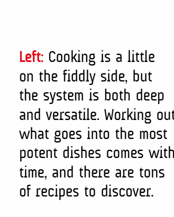


THE WITCHER III: WILD HUNT

WORSE THAN



Left: Being able to reach and climb anything you can see is only partially true. This is the edge of the world, which consists of bottomless ravines and invisible walls that encircle Hyrule.



Left: Cooking is a little on the fiddly side, but the system is both deep and versatile. Working out what goes into the most potent dishes comes with time, and there are tons of recipes to discover.

Cartography is a pretty tough gig. Or rather, it was, before satellite imagery was everywhere and cameras became a staple part of more or less any gadget. We're basically cheating today, whereas the mapmakers of old had to do everything by eye and by hand. It's not just the tech that has been making our lives easy in this regard either. Games are just as guilty, as anyone who has played a Ubisoft open world game will tell you – climb a tower and boom, instant awareness of every relevant thing in a quarter mile radius. And so, as you climb your first tower in *Breath Of The Wild*, you naturally expect the same kind of payoff. Modern games have conditioned you to think such might be the case, but it doesn't come. Topography is revealed, sure, but hidden treasures and secrets remain exactly that, save those you can see and tag through the scope on Link's latest toy, the Sheikah Slate – the high-tech tablet of choice for the discerning Hylian hero.

You're actively encouraged to splash this canvas, as it's slowly revealed, with beacons, icons and markers to remind yourself of discovered problems with undiscovered solutions, or resources you might need later. Today, in an era when we need do nothing of the sort either in our daily lives or in the majority of our games, this busywork is surprisingly satisfying, and that's merely a single example of a way in which *Breath Of The Wild* achieves its refreshing sense of actual discovery and adventure. We felt bad enough before about Tingle stealing thousands of our Rupees in exchange for his mapping services, but the problem appears to run far deeper than we knew. If *Breath Of The Wild* is anything to go by, he's been stealing our fun as well.

The idea that this is the franchise's first foray into open-world gaming is an incredible misnomer. Link's NES debut and its divisive sequel both went with similar setups, albeit constrained by the technology of the time. This too holds true of later games, to an extent, it's just that having media and public alike decorate *Ocarina Of Time* with so many medals, ribands and awards that it couldn't see where it was going had that exact effect. Nintendo was left emulating the formula of its accolade-blinded golden child rather than attempting the same kind of hardware-driven rejuvenation of structure whenever a new console would allow such, although the previously used themes of sea and sky – two famously quite empty things – suggest that hardware was probably just as much to blame.

Whether it's tech finally catching up to vision or vision finally catching up to potential, we're now at a point where a fully open Hyrule is free to rub shoulders with the open-world greats. Sure, it has to get on tip-toes to do so at points but still, that a *Zelda* game can stand alongside the long-serving pillars of modern open-world gaming and not look that short by comparison borders on 'miracle' status, especially considering that the rest of the industry has a good 15-year headstart on *Breath Of The Wild* in terms of fully open 3D environments.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

FREE FLOW: The versatility and connected nature of the game's myriad systems make it a joy to play around with, rewarding creative play with moments of unforgettable emergent gameplay just like the best games in the open world field.

The tired formula of 'get Hookshot in Temple #4, use Hookshot to clear Temple #5' is gone, then, but it finds itself replaced with a solution that is itself not without issues. The first four Shrines – which are mandatory before being allowed to hit the wider map beyond the Plateau – grant access to four key tools that will be used throughout your adventure. It feels liberating at first to be gifted such power so early, but as these are the only essentials in the game, there's only so much that puzzles and challenges based around these core skills can evolve over its course. This is especially true when the game's open nature means players could theoretically tackle any problem in the first few hours and while some solutions may not always be obvious, knowing that you definitely have the tools for the job already sort of makes the 'come back later' idea of map marking a little redundant unless you're in a rush to get somewhere else. Not all Shrines are created

equal, either. A fair few reward outside-the-box thinking that trivialises or breaks their tasks completely, but whether you see that as great free-form puzzle design or sloppy planning will likely vary on a case-by-case basis. Of the ones we broke, we were probably around 50/50 on that front by the time we were done. There are also an awful lot of combat-based Shrines, and the execution is weak. With only the most minor of changes, they're all the same single enemy in the same room, each serving as nothing more than a test of your knowledge of the (really simple) mechanics and a DPS check for those who don't have good enough gear to beat the tougher ones yet.

Inventory management itself is one of the biggest changes to the series and, while divisive, it's an interesting move that keeps you on your toes. Weapons break after a certain amount of use, which makes balancing what to take, what to leave, and what to use when important skills to develop. On the fly switching makes testing and learning the basics easy, while different weapon archetypes all serve different purposes. The rapid linear strikes of a spear will do wonders against certain enemy types, while others may be more susceptible to the crushing strikes of a two-handed weapon. There's a more varied and versatile arsenal available than in any *Zelda* title to date, but your loadout will change with pretty much every major fight, forcing you to adapt to each encounter or risk losing your most powerful gear. Shields and bows also suffer the same degradation from repeated use, making sitting behind a board nonviable and giving another reason (on top of ammo consumption) to think twice about every arrow you nock.

Armour isn't beholden to such rules, however, and while it's another distinct change to series norms in how each piece of equipment mitigates damages and provides skills independently, at least your wardrobe is in no danger of breaking. That is, if you even elect to use it – we, for whatever reason, decreed to keep Link in his pants for as long as possible, but a combination of environmental effects that can be cancelled with the right clothing and one-shot kills everywhere (attack damage can be pretty brutal) meant we eventually had to ditch our vows of nudity. We're glad we did, in hindsight. The new system is flexible and interesting, even more so when you consider that upgraded gear sets often offer decent bonuses that make them preferable to the mix-and-match sets you'll almost certainly spend most of the game wearing.

That's far from the biggest change from the *Zelda* conventions you're probably used to by now, although it's borderline impossible to discuss how *Breath Of The Wild* handles dungeons without stumbling into Spoiler City. Like so much of the series' design, dungeons have long been created from the same blueprint used in the early games, labyrinthine expanses of basic puzzles, locked doors and simple combat trials. Look at the vast majority of these through a modern lens and they make no sense. *Ocarina*'s Water Temple plans were clearly laid out with nothing but contempt for visitors, for instance, while general dungeon design across the series throws up places that exist in their own similar little logic bubbles. *BOTW*'s equivalents are, by stark contrast, believable and logical, smaller in scale but still packed with interesting and unique

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
You could probably smash through all the story stuff in about 20 hours, but distractions are both frequent and alluring. There's scope to get it done far quicker, too... sort of.

Q. 'SORT OF'?
Pre-release presentations were filled with talk of being able to run straight to the end of the game if you so desired, and that's only semi-true – there are mandatory missions to do first, plus you'd never have enough weapons to actually win if you just ran to the end.

Q. DOES IT USE AMIIBO FIGURES?
Of course, it's a first party game! Series figures can be scanned daily for random rewards, which can be anything from resources and materials to exclusive gear sets that can only be obtained in this way.



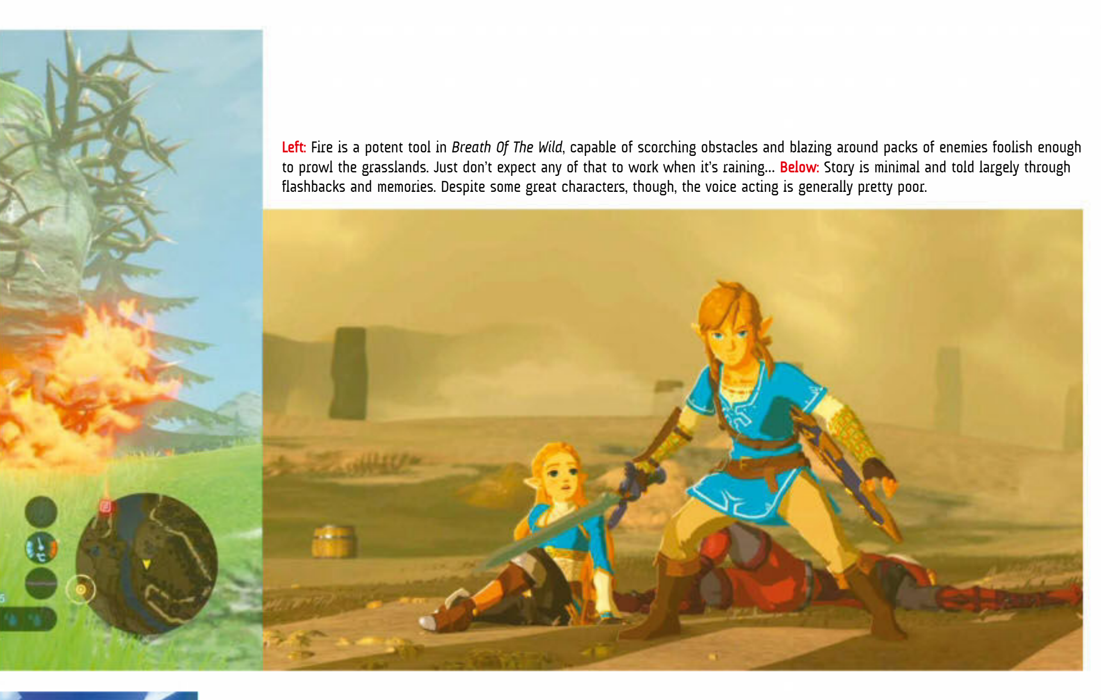


Below: Mini-bosses roam the land and stumbling across one unprepared can be terrifying. Later in the game, though, most can easily be farmed for great rewards.

Right: Shrines vary wildly in size and complexity. Some are over in seconds, while others hide their rewards behind a series of brain-teasers and trials.

THERE'S A MORE VARIED AND VERSATILE ARSENAL AVAILABLE THAN IN ANY ZELDA TITLE TO DATE, BUT YOUR LOADOUT WILL CHANGE WITH PRETTY MUCH EVERY MAJOR FIGHT, FORCING YOU TO ADAPT TO EACH ENCOUNTER OR RISK LOSING YOUR MOST POWERFUL GEAR

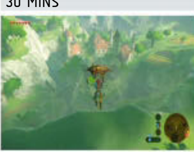
Left: Fire is a potent tool in *Breath Of The Wild*, capable of scorching obstacles and blazing around packs of enemies foolish enough to prowl the grasslands. Just don't expect any of that to work when it's raining… Below: Story is minimal and told largely through flashbacks and memories. Despite some great characters, though, the voice acting is generally pretty poor.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

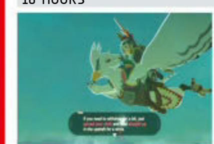
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



Stepping out onto the Great Plateau for the first time is Zelda's version of *Oblivion*'s dungeon escape or *Fallout 3*'s initial vault emergence – the marvellous sense of freedom is overwhelming.

10 HOURS



Your arsenal improves surprisingly quickly and by now, you've probably happened upon the tools to help you beat a few bosses… assuming you've not been distracted by the side quests and errands.

2 WEEKS



The credits may have rolled but completion percentage still sits at an embarrassingly low figure. The open world still holds many secrets, and you'll struggle to find them all before the DLC.



MONEY FOR NOTHING

Economy might be the last thing you expect to come up when discussing a *Zelda* game, but *Breath Of The Wild* finds itself caught in a strange limbo between the franchise's past and the nature of an open-world model. Making money has never been easier – between a bottomless bomb bag to aid with mining, the resource-rich world and lucrative monster parts, it's not uncommon for a trip to a merchant to end in a four-figure payday. But despite this, the game still frequently chucks Rupees into puzzle prizes or chests, blind to the fact that a 100-Rupee reward is embarrassingly stingy in this new climate. When you can just hit rocks for a few minutes and come out richer than if you had spent that time solving a puzzle, it's pretty clear that there's a problem.



challenges to overcome. Freed as the game is from the trappings of the 'use the item you got last to win' template, each can use its own mechanics to test players on a much broader scale. Combat in these spaces is also infrequent, but this again makes sense in context. With enemies littered all over the overworld (and respawning regularly with every Blood Moon event, which occurs every few in-game days), it's not like you'll be short of things to hit anyway.

This new-found sense of logic also carries over to most of the game's other systems, and makes for some incredible moments. Caught in a thunderstorm? Metal equipment will attract lightning, so unequip all metallic items to avoid getting the AC/DC treatment, or toss them (the items, not AC/DC) at enemies to let nature smite them on your behalf. Need to be somewhere in a hurry? Find a Stasis-friendly object, freeze it, then wait on it before jumping on board your own private flight as the stored kinetic energy does what your virtual legs couldn't be bothered to do. Out of fire arrows? Simply light the tip of a regular arrow on any open flame – don't try this with bomb arrows though. Attention to detail is amazing throughout, even extending to dialogue based on appearance and previous actions too, again just playing into the idea of this being an epic, personal adventure.

It's a shame, then, that things like dialogue aren't better. It's painfully clear that this is the series' first real foray into voiceover work (the CD-i games don't count, for obvious reasons) and between the loose, open-world-friendly story and the generally weak performances, things really aren't good on this front. It feels kind of weird that Link still doesn't speak in critical scenes when everyone else does, but that just seems like a blessing in disguise. Audio in general isn't the best, but when you're dealing with a series where the bar is so astronomically high in that regard, disappointment is almost to be expected. There are some amazing tunes, but with much of the soundtrack being minimal and incidental sound is comfortably the weakest part of the game.

But if that is your number one problem when shifting from a two-decade-old format to a brand new one, it's fair to say you've done pretty well. *Breath Of The Wild* delivers a huge world, and one that is interesting to explore even when such escapades prove fruitless. It comes good with satisfying combat and dozens of reasons to carry on playing after the credits. For all of its issues, it's a game that manages to reinvent itself, comfortably, effortlessly, in a space dominated by the industry's triple-A heavyweights. This is one of the most creative and engrossing open-world games in quite some time.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

CLASSIC ZELDA: While the structure feels fresh, callbacks to the series' formative years are hard to avoid. This is a natural evolution of the NES games, and it works really well.

OPEN WORLD: At the same time, the influence of modern open-world games is also clear. *BOTW* takes inspiration from the usual tropes rather than lifting them wholesale, becoming its own original beast in the process.



VERDICT 9/10

A BREATH OF FRESH AIR FOR THE SERIES

WELCOME TO THE ROBOPOCALYPSE

Horizon Zero Dawn

The fact that Guerrilla has never made a role-playing game before is really the source of *Horizon Zero Dawn's* greatest strengths and greatest weaknesses. The Dutch studio has been able to shed decades of accumulated baggage from the genre, striking out in interesting and engaging new directions, but it has also shown its lack of experience and full depth of understanding. The result is a game that is gorgeous and superbly made in many areas, but which lacks a few of the finer details that would make it truly groundbreaking.

The eye-catching element of *Horizon's* design is thankfully also one of its best; the machines are a delight to test yourself against. The escalation of the threat through the game is very nicely done as you work your way from the small Watchers and their agile leaping attacks to the Thunderjaws and their lumbering, multi-faceted attack patterns. The game is always keeping you on your toes as each new machine is introduced. At first we did everything we could to avoid the Watchers and Striders, relying on patches of long grasses and tracking their patrol patterns for our chance to dash to another piece of cover, but through levelling up, stronger weapons and new skills like overriding the machine AI, the Watchers and Striders create less concern. And as soon as one older machine feels dealt with, another is introduced with a completely different degree of threat, attack strength, weakness and in different numbers and combinations.

Then you actually have to fight them, because sneaking around might get you from place to place, but facing the machines is your fastest route to progress. Their intricate design allows components, even their weapon systems, to be detached (sometimes even picked up and used against them), which offers so many different tactical approaches. Do you take out the weapons of the biggest, meanest machine and then pick off the smaller enemies or stealth attack everyone on the periphery before going all-out on the giant? The tactical depth of your combat approach speaks to a developer not bogged down in the lineage of RPG design, but rather has been forged in the kiln of action games. Some of the combat areas of the game, from bandit camps to natural rock formations that contain the battle, would be as good in a FPS game as they are here. You'll find you have multiple options for entering areas, different vantage points and lots of chances to sneak or face your opponent head-on.

We played through the game in a largely stealth-focused manner, which the game compliments beautifully. If you lean towards sniper rifles and stealth kills in *Fallout* or like playing rogue characters in other RPGs, *Horizon* was made for you. If fast-paced, hectic action is your thing, *Horizon* can sometimes feel like a sci-fi version of *Dark Souls* as you roll, duck and dodge away from machines before catching their one weak spot, but it doesn't offer quite the same depth in that area. As you get further into the game, weapons and upgrades become available to you that allow for a more head-on approach, but they take some getting to.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

MONSTER HUNTER: There's no getting around it, the machines in this game are fantastically designed and threatening in entirely unique ways. Measuring yourself against them through the game is a continual thrill.

Ultimately, we can't think of another RPG in which we actually felt compelled to use all of the tools at our disposal to complete the game. The bow and spear will get you through most scenarios, but with bigger bandit camps and larger machines, setting traps and luring enemies is not only very satisfying, but also pretty much essential. We didn't touch the traps for a third of the game and then they became a massive part of our combat strategy right to the end. Similarly the options that protected against elemental effects, applying the right upgrades to armour and weapons, all became an important element of our strategy.

We probably all expected that Guerrilla would provide a more action-orientated approach to the RPG game structure than the likes of *The Witcher III* or *Fallout* and that's exactly how things have played out. *Horizon* straddles the divide between action game and RPG, perhaps more so than even *The Legend Of Zelda*. In the opening parts of the game, so focused and directed is the experience that it can feel a lot more like an open-world actioner



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Netherlands
PUBLISHER: Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Guerrilla Games
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE



WORSE THAN



THE WITCHER III: WILD HUNT



Above: *Horizon's* world design falls somewhere nicely between *Fallout* and *The Witcher*, full of lush, green nature and then suddenly the signs of a once great and dominant civilisation appear before you. It reminded us a little of Ninja Theory's *Enslaved* at times.

THE TACTICAL DEPTH OF YOUR COMBAT APPROACH SPEAKS TO A DEVELOPER NOT BOGGED DOWN IN THE LINEAGE OF RPG DESIGN



Inset: The bow combat at first may feel a little slow and lumbering against such nimble and mobile machines, but as you level up your skills and purchase better bows you'll likely find it to be a more than effective weapon for precision combat

HUD HEAVY

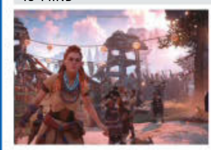
We personally found the amount of HUD furniture to be a little heavy handed on its default setting, cluttering up the screen with information and notifications, but thankfully this can all be customised. Every element of the heads-up display can be turned off completely and all elements, save for the compass at the top of the screen, can be switched to a dynamic setting that only activates when you're in battle or start moving items around with the d-pad. Given how gorgeous some of the world design is and how good it looks on a 4K screen, we would highly recommend switching to a dynamic HUD setting once you feel that you've learned everything it has to teach you.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

40 MINS



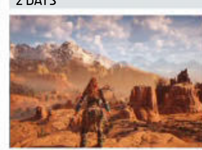
The lengthy intro to Aloy gives you all of the basics before you finally start interacting with the Nora and compete in the Proving. This is where things really kick off.

5 HOURS



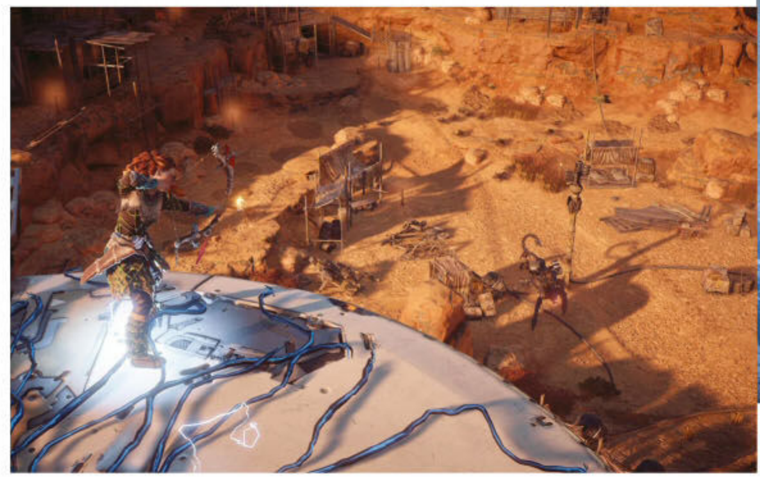
You've got some basic skills under your belt and hopefully you've started hacking into some of the machines. Good for aiding in battle and for getting around the map a little faster.

2 DAYS



The wider map of *Horizon* is gradually opening up to you as your level increases and your ability to survive the savage lands improves. There's great variety in the kinds of environments you get to visit.

Below: Getting to the top of a Tallneck is just as enjoyable as you might imagine. The climb itself is pretty simple, with none of the challenge of something like *Shadow Of The Colossus* if you suspected that.

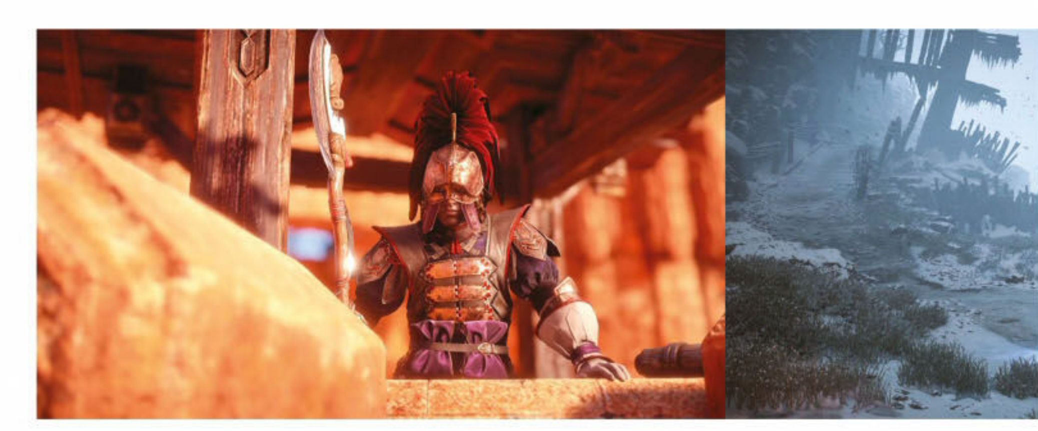




Above: Mounts become an important part of navigating the map, not just to speed things up, but to keep clear of machines. The level balance of the map can change wildly as a mission advising at least level 15 might take you through regions with level 25-plus enemies. Just keep running

Better in 4K?

We've called *Horizon* the PS4 Pro's champion, so it is only right that we should test it extensively on a 4K, HDR enabled TV to see if it holds up, and thankfully for everyone involved, it does. Guerrilla's reputation for making highly polished, graphically impressive experiences remains intact, with some particularly good work to be seen in the facial animation and performance capture. But it's out in the open world with the sparks flying, where pieces of machines clattering to the floor during battle that the real quality of this game in 4K shines through. Is it worth upgrading to play? We're still not sure about that and we should add that having played it on an older model PS4 on a standard HD TV, it plays beautifully and we encountered no technical issues.





in the vein of the *Arkham* series. Missions come slowly and you'll notice that whole sections of your log remain greyed out as you gradually play through the opening hours. However, once you leave the Embrace (the game's opening area) and side quests begin to populate your mission log, all that falls away. What that heavily directed opening actually gives you is a narrative and emotional launch pad from which to propel Aloy through the rest of the game.

And we have to say, we love Aloy a lot. Her tone manages to play nicely between scepticism and wonder. Having grown up as an outcast from her tribe she carries none of their superstitions, none of their prejudices, but also none of their experience. The world you enter then is as new to her as it is to you. And her personality, while you can nudge it in certain directions from time to time, feels very defined as one of compassion, empathy and determination. Aloy won't stand for condescension, she won't suffer fools and she has no time for mysticism covering self-interest. However, she seems to respect the cultures and traditions of the people she meets even if she doesn't hold to them. It's a tough balancing act, but one that voice actress Ashly Burch (who also voiced Chloe Price in *Life Is Strange*) does superbly.

In fact, the voice acting and performances on the whole in this game are pretty good. There are some standout characters who manage to come across as very genuine people in an extraordinary world and others that perhaps fall into the hammier camp of post-apocalyptic fiction. It's only really the lower-level NPCs that break the immersion with over enunciation.

When it's not great though, its failings aren't helped by some mixed sound design implementation. Again, on the whole the game is very good in the sound department, with a lot of good performances, as mentioned, and some fantastic music. However, the sound levels can be off when Errand quest NPCs shout across the map to you for help and you can't even see them. Their voices travel across the plains, lacking atmosphere or depth and they repeat the same lines over and over. Some similar repetition can be found in villages and towns with merchants and citizens offering little variety. This isn't uncommon for a game of this type, but it stood out against such big accomplishments.

By comparison, the machine and animal sound effects in the game and the way they are introduced as background noise to make you aware of their presence, even when you can't immediately get a line of sight on them, is excellent. Half of the *Horizon* experience is about being aware at all times where machines might be lurking or patrolling and the audio design is a massive part of that. So, having an element of the sound design stand out like a sore thumb breaks that immersion, and frankly it's a compliment to everything else in *Horizon* that it's only at this level that things feel like more time and experience might have helped to get more from the game.

The higher-level gameplay then, for the most part, is excellent, so it is in the smaller details that we find *Horizon's* inconsistency.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CONTROL THE ROLE: Horizon is a role-playing game in many respects, but not particularly in the narrative control sense. With a bigger, more experience writing team, Guerrilla could really improve in this area. A fine first attempt though.

It has moments and areas where it does superbly well at capturing the little details just right and others where it fails completely. Some of the animation, for instance Aloy's jumping, isn't as fluid or naturalistic as other elements of the game. Some of the facial animation of lesser NPCs isn't great and the character models have a tendency to flail around a little without really being tied down to the words being spoken. And while much of the combat design is excellent, mapping traps, potions and health to the d-pad is a fiddly choice that can be aggravating in the heat of battle. A tough compromise for mapping so much to the DualShock 4 controller.

That said, it gets a lot of other lesser-appreciated elements right. The music is excellent, marrying sweeping orchestral pieces and drums with electronic stings that punctuate the peace much as the machines do the landscape reclaimed by nature. The escalation of combat and its increasing complexity are excellent: on-the-fly crafting brings added tension and immediacy to battles. We'd like to compliment the fast travel too, which starts off as a limited feature based on how many packs you can carry and becomes limitless when you upgrade. As missions send you from one side of the map to the other, it saves a lot of headaches.

The story is so wrapped up in mystery and discovery that we don't want to get into any details in this review. Suffice to say that while it can feel a little derivative in places (a shortcoming that could be levelled at several areas of the game, but is somewhat expected), it is driven by a compelling world that gradually reveals itself. Discovering how civilisation was lost and how the machines rose are weaved nicely into Aloy's search for her own hidden origin and journey. What's more, the main story campaign is supplemented by some meaty side quests that can often be as involved and varied as the main narrative.

This generation has been blessed by some excellent RPG and action-adventure offerings so far and while *Horizon Zero Dawn* sometimes shows its team's relative inexperience in places, the overall construction, the combat and the characters elevate it into the upper echelons of the genre. It might not be *Witcher III* level of excellence, but for a first attempt from Guerrilla, it's impressively close.

VERDICT 8/10

BRINGS ACTION ACUMEN TO THE RPG WORLD WITH STYLE

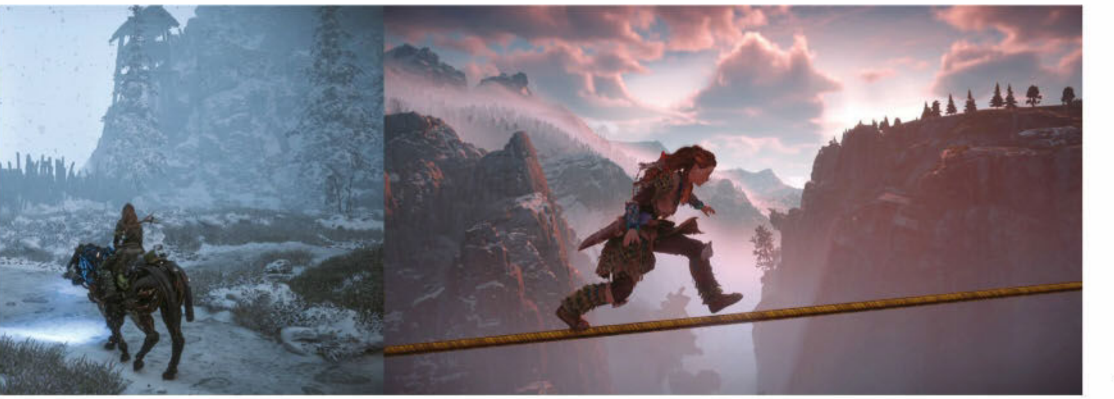
FAQs

Q. SO, HOW LONG IS IT?
Guerrilla has stated the main campaign is about 30 hours, although most players will need to bulk out their stats through side missions to survive.

Q. IS THE STORY ANY GOOD?
It's fairly straightforward and traditional really (hero seeks revenge on villain who killed her people while uncovering mystery surrounding her own birth), but the world building is excellent. A solid origin story for a new PlayStation icon.

Q. SO, SEQUEL THEN?
Guerrilla has expressed its desire to keep going, but sales are likely to have a big say. We'd guess, given the quality of this release, that we'll be seeing more from Aloy in the coming years.

ALOY WON'T STAND FOR CONDESCENSION, SHE WON'T SUFFER FOOLS AND SHE HAS NO TIME FOR MYSTICISM COVERING SELF-INTEREST





Above: The single-player component of *For Honor* is ridiculous, throwaway fun for five hours. Largely forgettable, but a decent extended tutorial to prepare you for real combat online.

THE ART OF WAR

For Honor

A startling trend is quickly becoming apparent when it comes to Ubisoft. While the publisher is known for its sprawling, heavily iterative open worlds – bloated with collectibles, familiar content and cartoon caricatures of whatever period it is brazenly attempting to depict – its finest titles are the polar opposite. Smaller, succinct games with an eye on careful innovation and the unique execution of bold ideas; *Child Of Light*, *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* and, of course, *Rainbow Six Siege* are the key examples. And then there is *For Honor*, a game quite unlike anything the company has released in its thirty-year history, a uniquely brilliant fighting game styled up for a generation weaned on first-person shooters.

For Honor might look a hell of a lot like *Ryse: Son Of Rome* with a good helping of *Dynasty Warriors* thrown in for good measure, but that comparison couldn't be further off the mark. In spite of the medieval setting, the tight third-person camera, and presence of AI minions stumbling around a gorgeous variety of fields of war, *For Honor* is, in actuality, a fighting game. And yes, we are being completely serious.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montreal
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

For Honor unleashes one of the most creative melee combat systems we've seen in years with its "Art Of Battle" marketing malarkey. As the underlying feature of *For Honor*'s starring multiplayer system (and largely avoidable single-player campaign/ extended tutorial), most of the combat and moment-to-moment action is built specifically around this seemingly easy to understand – but surprisingly deep and difficult to master – mechanical fighting system.

FOR HONOR UNLEASHES ONE OF THE MOST CREATIVE MELEE COMBAT SYSTEMS WE'VE SEEN IN YEARS

It is built on a clear system of checks and balances; rooted heavily in active defence, with three-hit combos, guard breaks, parries, dodges, throws and a selection of light and heavy attacks giving each of the 12 characters on the roster a unique flair and flavour in combat. There's a sublime balance to be found between the characters on roster, with the standard warrior (Vanguard), swift griefer (Assassin) and lumbering behemoth (Heavy) each necessitating a different approach to positioning and combat. A hybrid class of the two preceding warriors also brings an advanced touch to play; with so many different combat proficiencies running around on a field at any one time, visual awareness and identification is as important as memorising combos and attack patterns.

There are many reasons *For Honor* works so well, but something has to be said about the quality of animation here. Ubisoft Montreal has always displayed a rich proficiency in visualising nuance in character movement,

FAQs

Q. HOW'S THE OPEN WORLD?
There isn't one! *For Honor* is set in beautifully crafted combat arenas designed to foster tight, tactical engagements between players.

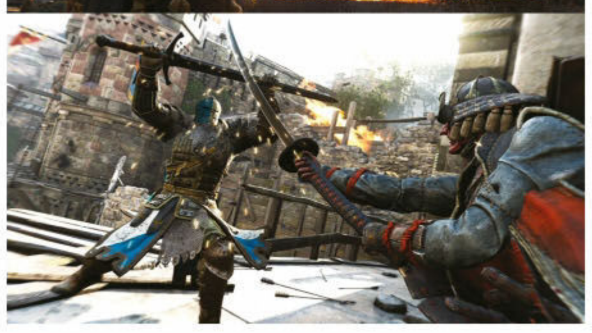
Q. AHA, YEAH, SURE, SO THE OPEN WORLD… ?
No, idiot. There is no open world. No towers. No magic apples. This is a fighting game with the *Resident Evil 4* camera.

Q. IS UBISOFT MAD?
Mad? You better believe it is! Mad genius. Ubisoft has never released a game quite like *For Honor*, it's *awesome*.



Left: While this probably goes without saying, *For Honor* is an online-only experience. You'll need a stable connection and open NAT connection to get the best out of it. **Below:** Ubisoft has stumbled out of the block when it comes to networking, although *Rainbow Six Siege* fans will remember this pain all too well.

Below: *For Honor* is unlike anything Ubisoft has released before. A largely contained, mechanically solid fighting game with beautifully designed underlying combat systems. It's quite the accomplishment.



FRACTION WAR

***For Honor*'s multiplayer is wrapped up in an overarching state called Faction War, which attempts to bring the underlying faction warfare to a head with eyes on the larger battlefield. It's an interesting idea; in theory it should be directing players into specific game modes in an effort to take control of territories, but, sadly, as the game has no restriction on faction selection it doesn't feel as succinct as it could or should be. Ultimately, it feels like a half-hearted attempt at making the multiplayer of *For Honor* into something larger, but it fails to capture the excitement that was born out of *Chromehound*'s similar game mode back in 2006 – although that is a concession of Ubisoft not wanting to split the player base.**

BETTER THAN

DYNASTY WARRIORS 8





WORSE THAN

STREET FIGHTER V

but its clarity is key here – it changes the game. Being able to read a situation is essential for survival, let alone victory; knowing when you need to spring dutifully out of the way of attacks, understanding when a character may be goading you into an unwarranted assault or judging which direction to block while under a lightning fast barrage of blows and combos is all part of the charm.

This is essentially what makes *For Honor* a fantastic fighting game. It requires active defence at all times. It's intimidating, especially when facing a player who clearly knows their class inside and out – but pulling a surprise execution out of nowhere is exhilarating, perhaps in a way that only shooters can replicate. The basics work by asking you to drop into one of three stances – left, right or overhead – which allows you to block and attack from each respective location.

You build out from these fundamentals. Every attack, every counter and every combo is built out of defence; solo fights can be a dangerous waiting game, while group battles are a mess of lighting-fast reaction strikes. But the key is that it is uncomplicated, built around basic but fair fundamentals – all governed by a stamina bar and a locked-down move set accessible from the menu.

There is only one instance in which the balance of combat is skewed, and that is with a mechanic called Revenge. It's an enhanced state – activated by blocking attacks – which essentially activates a small window of 'god mode'. The studio has continually likened this to unleashing an Ultra in *Street Fighter IV*, but the reality is that if you see a player going Super Sayain – bright gold glow and all – the best tactic, sadly, is to run. And there is little honour in that – or pushing people off of cliffs in one-on-one duals, though we still do it.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

VISUAL PRESENTATION: Taking the basic structure of a fighting game and imposing it into a third-person brawler works wonderfully, better than it has any right to.

There's a heavy learning curve to *For Honor*, but every victory feels hard earned – justified by virtue of how solid and enjoyable the underlying systems and mechanics are. Like other fighting games of its kind, the more time you put into *For Honor* the more you get out of it. It's a game that feels like it scales with your understanding and appreciation of each of the characters and classes; game modes and weapon types. It's quite the achievement from Ubisoft, although it does struggle in some all too familiar ways.

Much like *Rainbow Six Siege*, the back-end is a mess. Load times are overly long, there's a clear issue with lag and repeated server disconnects that ensure *For Honor* is never consistently engaging – because it can't be. The biggest issue facing Ubisoft now is the lack of punishment for rage quitters – a frequent occurrence, at least on Xbox One and PS4, both tested – which can also have a tendency to destabilise the entire game and cause a crash. *For Honor* uses a network model in which all players are connected to one another at all time, which essentially means that any disruption to the link causes problems for all. It's a frustrating reality, but one Ubisoft is already working diligently on a fix for. Like *Siege*, *For Honor* is in the beginning stages of becoming something truly unique and brilliant. If you've ever struggled to get into fighting games, are eager for a new multiplayer game to try your hand at, or are simply interested in what happens when Ubisoft diverts its resources out of populating open worlds with content and into an experience that thrives because of its nuanced design, then try *For Honor* – you won't regret it.

VERDICT 8/10
A BOLD RELEASE CAPTURING THE ART OF BATTLE

Short videos make the rules of each game really clear; a weird mix of children's TV hosts and stock photo imagery.

IS THIS MINIGAME COLLECTION WORTH THE COST?

1-2-Switch

Nintendo has a solid history of launching consoles alongside games that truly show off the new trifecta of hardware, software and control method. *Mario 64*, with the N64 pad analog stick allowing you to have unprecedented control over the portly plumber, all rendered in what was at the time, mind-blowing 3D. The Wii's motion controllers were shown off perfectly by *Wii Sports*. Remember that first time you returned a ball on Tennis, while the magic was still intact, and it all felt like complete witchcraft?

The genius behind *1-2-Switch* is how it is so reliant on the new features of Nintendo's Joy-Con controllers, which clip onto the side of the Switch unit, that you don't actually need to look at the screen when you're playing it. It's all about sound, timing and your interactions with your opponent.

All aspects of the Joy-Con are used, from the IR sensor, motion controls and the new 'HD' rumble. Guessing how many 'balls' are in a box by shifting around the Joy-Con, or twisting one to feel slight changes in clicks when cracking a safe is a thrill the first time you do it, but these games don't hold up to multiple plays. The finest titles are reaction tests, like *Samurai Training*, *Quick Draw*, or the brilliant *Fake Draw* (you'll all fall for 'file' and 'five', believe it). Games that require you to interact with your opponent, with loading screens encouraging gamesmanship, like trying to fake them out.

And of course, there's the suggestive *Milk*, which has you look someone straight in the eye while making some gestures that could be interpreted very differently as you squeeze a virtual udder. Sadly, there's no way to up the difficulty on any of these, meaning that once you're done with a game, there's very little to pull you back in outside of a new group of friends to play the game with. A big ask, that.

This is where *1-2-Switch* fails. It's great fun, but *Wii Sports* was packed in with the console. Everyone had the chance to use it and when done with it, it would happily sit in a box until the time some other new, willing people showed up and it came back out of retirement. *1-2-Switch* isn't a pack-in – it's forty quid, and that's quite a lot for not only such a slim package, but one with such a slim lifespan too.

It's a game that will fit in at any party or family home, but it's a shame that because of the simple fact it isn't packed in with the console it won't necessarily find its audience. For those that pick it up, that first time through, with new people - it's genuinely magic. After that, there's little left.

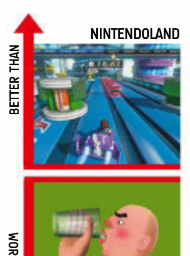


DETAILS

FORMAT: Nintendo Switch
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

NINTENDOLAND



WORSE THAN

WARIOWARE SMOOTH MOVES



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TOO EASY: The ability to raise the difficulty of some of the games, or even offer a few more stages rather than just the one, would go a long way to justifying the cost.



VERDICT 6/10

GREAT FUN WHILE IT LASTS – WHICH ISN'T LONG

NOT ENOUGH TO BREAK FAMILIAR GROUND

Super Bomberman R

There's really nothing quite like a round or ten of *Bomberman*. Run around a maze, plant bombs, blow up your friends and attempt to avoid getting fried yourself. It's a simplicity that's granted the classic Konami series a healthy dose of immortality, but when an Nintendo Switch launch title is asking 50 hard earned pounds for the privilege of replaying the same concept you've played on every platform ever, that nostalgia comes with a bitter aftertaste.

This being the 33rd anniversary of the original *Bomberman*, you'd hope *Super Bomberman R* would come bundled with a rip-roaring swagger down a three-decades-long memory lane. Instead, you get a relatively short campaign intercut with a series of sugar-sweet cartoon animations that wouldn't look out of place on *CBeebies*. Sure, there's a decent variety of objectives to mix things up, such as blowing up a certain number of enemies, collecting keys or hitting switches, but in the end it's pretty obvious this forgettable Story mode is nothing more than an extended tutorial. It's not going to blow you away solo, but team up with a friend in local co-op and its bosses and challenges at least feel a little more rewarding (if frustratingly devoid of any real innovation).

As Switch's first proper multiplayer title, *Super Bomberman R* is really counting on that familiar brand of fun that's been blowing up scenery since the NES. You can play against up to three other players online, with that classic Battle mode setup (where defeated players can still throw bombs into the grid from its outer edges and earn another shot at glory) making for an ace reason to jump onto its servers. Winning matches will earn you coins (the game's in-game currency), which can then be used to purchase hats, new levels or continue playing during the campaign if you waste all your lives. It's a cute way to tap into that moreish arcade feel, but these coins run out too often (especially considering the undulating difficulty of its Story mode).

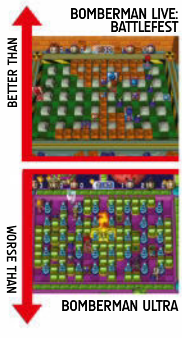
However, it's in its local multiplayer form that *Super Bomberman R* really taps into the social gaming angle that Nintendo is selling Switch on. The game supports up to eight players, tuning into that couchplay madness that's already making 1-2 Switch and Snipperclips so popular. It's here that lack of any real new innovation gets a pass, with that oh-so-addictive fun of trapping a friend between your bomb and their own, only to see them fired off the map in a blaze of smoke, making it all very worthwhile.

Super Bomberman R doesn't ruin the classic B-Man recipe, but with a price tag as big as *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, you can't help feeling this is a digital-only arcade title with the wrong price stuck to its box.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: In-house/ HexaDrive
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
BOMBERMAN LIVE: BATTLEFEST



WORSE THAN
BOMBERMAN ULTRA

CONNECTED

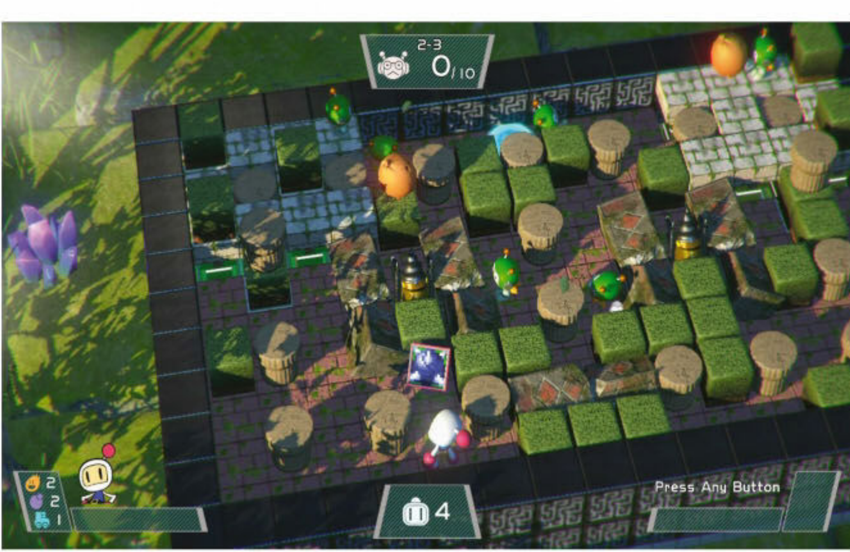
EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

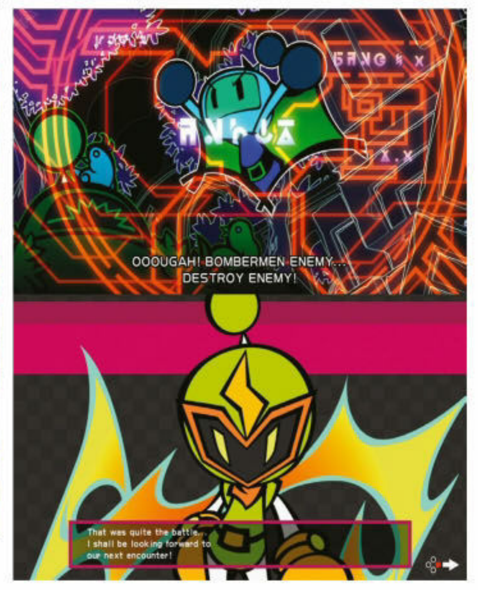
MULTIPLE MACHINES: You can connect up to three other Switches, enabling you duke it in eight-player Local Battle matches. This is the kind of multiplayer action we've hoping for with Switch.

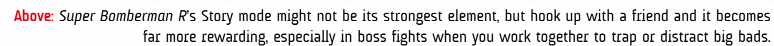


VERDICT 6/10

FUN, BUT FAR FROM AN EXPLOSIVE REINVENTION.







Above: *Super Bomberman R*'s Story mode might not be its strongest element, but hook up with a friend and it becomes far more rewarding, especially in boss fights when you work together to trap or distract big bads.

MICROSOFT TRIES TO CRACK THE CONSOLE-RTS CONUNDRUM… AGAIN

Halo Wars 2

It's no secret real-time strategy remains one of the few genres yet to properly seed on consoles, but what better way to cross-pollinate than one of the most recognisable franchises on the planet? The incredibly talented (and now long defunct) Ensemble Studios tried it with the original *Halo Wars* and ultimately failed to start an RTS landslide away from PC. So, eight years on, can Creative Assembly work its *Total War*-flavoured magic and make *Halo* and real-time strategy co-exist in science fiction harmony?

Halo Wars 2 is one of those games that wears its influences on its sleeves. Spend five minutes in its polished, hyper-stylised world and you can practically feel it trying to tap into that delicious magic that made the *Command & Conquer* series, the pinnacle of accessible real-time strategy, so popular. Units are clearly defined in their roles and base-building is fun, fast and instantly empowering. The two share rich, rewarding universes and scenery-chewing cutscenes, but that's where the similarities end. *C&C*'s longevity came down to the way it balanced simplicity and complex systems, but in its desire to make *HW2* appeal to the casual audience of Xbox One, Creative Assembly ends up over diluting its end product.

A deep RTS experience this certainly isn't – the sheer level of automation sees to that – but that's not to say those compromises were for nothing. Working off the basic structure of the original 2009 game, it's almost shocking how well *HW2*'s control work on a gamepad. The use of radial wheels, hot keys and a 'sprint' button (which enables you to navigate the battlefield at speed) has been carefully calibrated for a controller and it makes selling the transition a lot easier. The only caveat being the console-focus of its menus makes using a mouse and keyboard on PC noticeably less intuitive.

Halo Wars 2 might not be breaking the mould established by its predecessor, but it's certainly received some much needed tinkering. There are far more tutorials and hints in *HW2*

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: United Kingdom
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Creative Assembly/343 Industries
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

HALO WARS



WORSE THAN



TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER



Above: If you've played *Halo Wars* (or any RTS worth its salt) you'll recognise the rock/paper/scissors setup of the game's combat – air vehicles trump tanks, tanks trump infantry, infantry trump air vehicles. That these vehicles and units are already so iconic doesn't hurt either.

Below: *HW2* has plenty of content to keep you entertained, but its Blitz mode really steals the show. Paired with other players in a 1v1, 2v2 or 3v3 matchup, the quick matches play perfectly to the console-orientated strengths as you throw everything you have in crazy, frenetic battles.

HALO WARS 2 MIGHT NOT BE A SHOOTER, BUT IT FEELS AS ACCESSIBLE AS ANY TITLE WITH A SPARTAN IN IT



FAQs

Q. AM I FIGHTING THE COVENANT AGAIN?

Actually, you fight a group called The Banished in the campaign, but yeah, they're basically a red version of the Covenant.

Q. WILL MULTIPLAYER BE RANKED?

Yes, but not at launch. The developers will be fine tuning it for balance before setting up a proper ranked system.

Q. WHAT ABOUT MASTER CHIEF?

The Spartan poster boy might not be in this *Halo*, but there are plenty of other super-soldiers to take into battle.

than there were in the original, so you're no longer surprised to discover Spartans can commandeer a Wraith. Resource gathering remains automatic (as does combat, once again based on a rock/paper/scissors setup), but you can now take advantage of new Leader Powers (such as being able to heal entire armies or call in missile strikes), a new trump card that can make all the difference if used correctly.

Thankfully, mission design and locations have been give a redesign – linear paths are gone, replaced instead by multiple routes that offer potential flanking options (or ambushes, depending on your luck). It's a structure that urges and often rewards the plucky explorer, with missions having moved well beyond the simple build base, find enemy base, destroy enemy base routine. *Halo*'s over-dramatic sci-fi setting makes for an ideal backdrop and the missions are often enjoyably diverse, if perhaps a little too easy to navigate but for the last few encounters of the game, which are a little trickier.

The warm and comforting set dressing of the *Halo* universe is certainly the main reason *Halo Wars 2* is such a diluted experience compared to the likes of *Starcraft II* and *Total War: Warhammer*, but it gives the game every chance an RTS is ever going to get to succeed on console. The beautifully rendered CG cutscenes, the plot that weaves into the existing canon, the sight of Spartans, Warthogs and Pelicans swooping about the shop – it's not a shooter, but it feels as accessible as any title with the word 'Halo' on the box.

New villain Atriox – the head of a mean Covenant splinter group called The Banished – is also the best antagonist the series has spawned since the Arbiter. Those aforementioned cutscenes in between missions are full of the usual pomp and cheesy machismo, it's just a shame so many other characters fall flat compared to the complex Brute sat in the seat marked 'villain'. But if you love your *Halo* lore, the story of a lost UNSC ship and its crew reappearing after nearly 30 years will no doubt tickle your fancy.

Multiplayer also returns, with your usual Co-op, Deathmatch and Skirmish options on offer to keep you busy online. It's pretty standard fare, but it's when you pair up against another player that the dilution of the elements that make the RTS genre so unique becomes painfully obvious. There's very little cover to take advantage of, bar sparingly placed garrisons that act like makeshift bunkers, but the automation of so many systems makes much of the micromanagement and busywork that defines a hard-fought RTS victory feel a little less sweet in *HW2*.

This desire to make a real-time strategy game feel accessible certainly takes the edge off the campaign and the multiplayer side of things, but it has born some very sweet fruit: Blitz mode. Combining the card-collecting battles of a CCG with a barebones RTS structure, Blitz breaks *HW2* down into quick ten to 15 minute games where cards are played to deploy troops and effects. Free of the usual shackles expected of a regular real-time strategy title, Blitz mode embraces the 'pick up and play' mentality of *Halo* proper and reshapes it perfectly for a new audience.

At its heart, *HW2* is a console RTS that does what it needs to fit the broader appeal of the modern console generation. On PC its approach to game design will keep it off most GOTY lists, but on Xbox One its seamless gamepad control scheme and hefty selection modes make it a must for *Halo* devotees. Look past the shortcuts and you'll find the best effort yet to light the real-time strategy fire on console.

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

CROSS PLAY: Thanks to Microsoft's love for all things Play Anywhere, you can sync your saves between both the PC and Xbox One so you can switch between the two at will (if that's your thing).

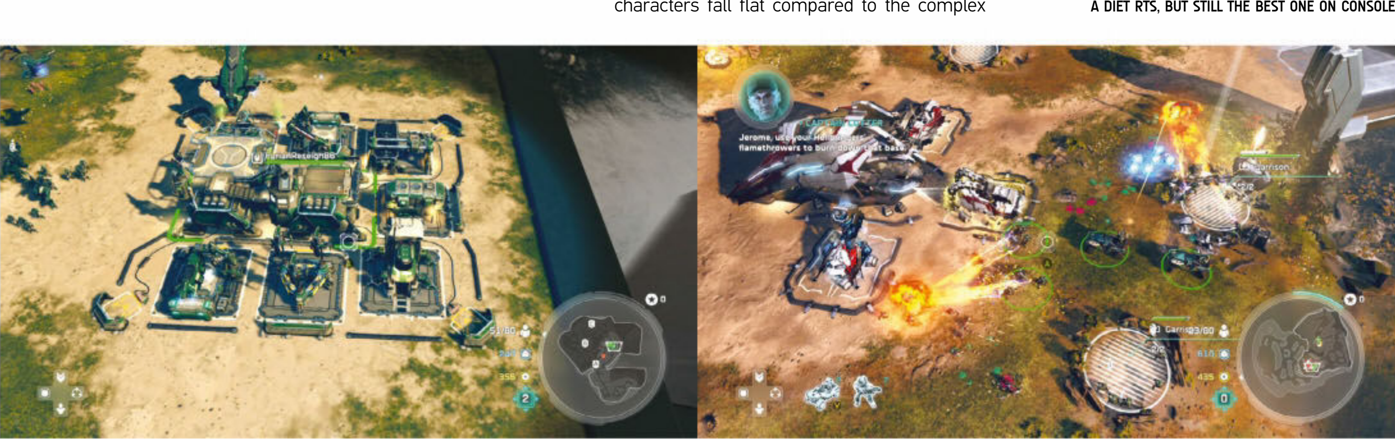
BATTLING WITH BLITZ MODE

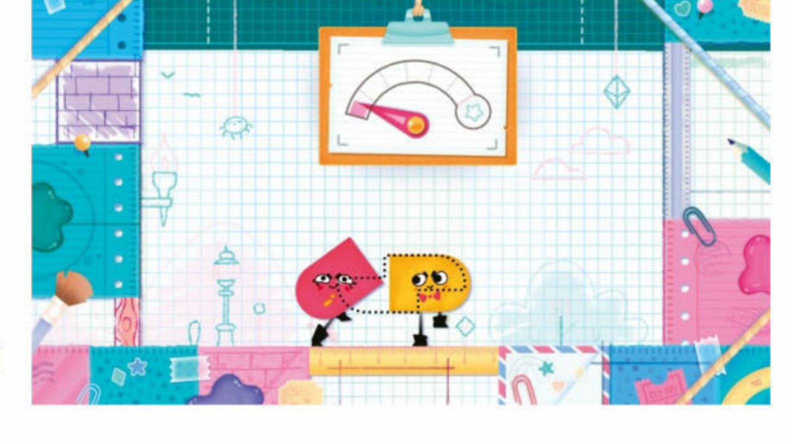
BLITZ MODE IS *Halo Wars 2*'s crowning achievement, but it's focus on quick, instantaneous battles is also emblematic of why Creative Assembly's shiny new sequel can't hang with the RTS big boys on PC. That said, turning an RTS with such recognisable units into a quick-fire PvP CCG might be a stroke of genius.

Doubling down on simplicity, Blitz matches are 3v3 affairs with players fighting to control zones on a map. Cards can be played if you have enough power, but you'll have to redeploy troops at your team's starting zone if you get wiped out. Cards are unlocked in booster packs, with a job lot unlocked via completing the campaign. However, there's clearly a not so subtle nudge from *HW2* to invest in more packs with actual money.

VERDICT 7/10

A DIET RTS, BUT STILL THE BEST ONE ON CONSOLE





CUTTING-EDGE GAMEPLAY

Snipperclips

On paper, *Snipperclips* seems like just another puzzle game. With the Nintendo Switch's relatively limited launch line-up, a local co-op puzzle game that utilises all the unique features of the Nintendo Switch is incredibly welcome, even if the game itself might seem a little bit lacking.

The concept of *Snipperclips* is that you have to cut shapes into yourself in order to solve physics-based puzzles in addition to working with a co-op partner to unlock new challenges. However, we found that the single-player elements of the game remove half of the fun that *Snipperclips* offers. Alongside a partner, puzzles become more fun and dynamic as you co-ordinate to cut yourselves into shapes to solve a puzzle, or get an item. Where this further shines is in its use of the Nintendo Switch's Joy-Con controllers. Every console comes equipped to play multiplayer, and *Snipperclips* is a great use-case for this.

Puzzles and challenges have you cutting yourself into shapes, jumping, catching fish or carefully cutting out shapes in order to progress. The cute hand-drawn artstyle allows for some pretty hilarious moments. Your characters, cleverly named Snip and Clip, are both adorned with hand-drawn faces that change every time you perform an action. It's great, family-friendly action – while it lasts.

What we found lacking in *Snipperclips* is puzzle variety. You'll find yourself having a sense of deja-vu while playing. The puzzles cycle around, and while you unlock different worlds built around various themes, the puzzles never get too challenging or shake themselves up to provide a greater challenge. For players that play in co-op and are able to complete puzzles pretty swiftly, you'll pick up on the environmental hints in the game, which are hidden in the backgrounds of levels. While this is a welcome addition, it does trivialise the game at some points, which means that you're never faced with any gargantuan challenges, nor does it feel fresh.

What *Snipperclips* did remind us of however is a mobile game. With its limited level design and complexity, it apes the design of games like *Angry Birds* with regards to level unlocks. This begs the question – is it really worth the money? We found the £19.99 asking price to be too high for what the game actually offers, which is unfortunate because as a bite-sized title it would have been perfect. This digital release might not be the best bang for your-buck, but the fun lies in playing with other people, rather than the strength of its own design. If you're looking for a game to play on the Nintendo Switch to show friends and family, it's fantastic. If you're looking for a deeper experience, you might want to look elsewhere.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: SFB Games
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN 1-2-SWITCH

WORSE THAN WORLD OF GOO



FINGERPRINT

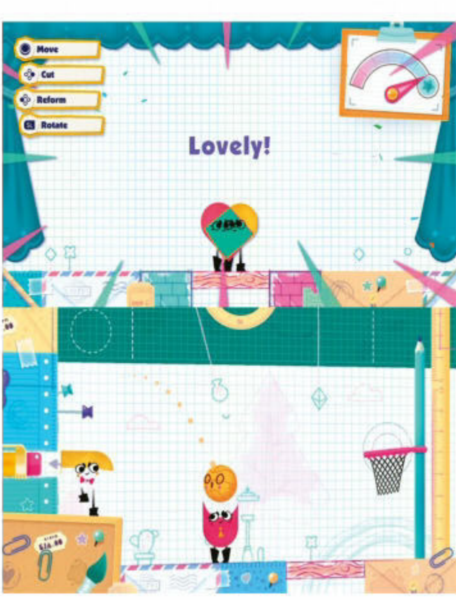
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

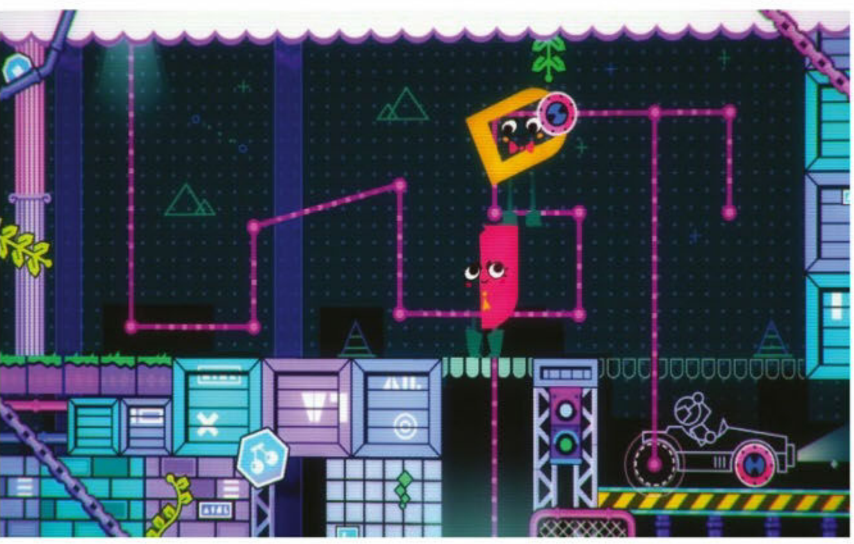
CUTESY ARTSTYLE: The style and illustrations in *Snipperclips* make the game pop out, whether you're playing on a TV or the console itself. The characters are teeming with personality.

VERDICT 6/10



GREAT FUN WITH FRIENDS.





Above: Exploring new worlds is enjoyable, but the challenges often remain the same. Left: Cutting yourselves into various shapes is always a whole lot of fun - especially in multiplayer.

IF HOTLINE MIAMI WENT HIPPY

Future Unfolding

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Spaces of Play
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £TBC
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7 (64-bit), 2.4GHz Intel Core i5, 4GB RAM, Intel Iris Graphics, 300MB available storage
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



***Future Unfolding* tells you nothing. Spawning you into a bright and beautiful natural landscape, it gives you no indication of where to go, no instruction on what the buttons on your controller do, no hint about your ultimate goal.** Experimentation and exploration represent your only options.

In that sense, it is reminiscent of *The Witness*, a game designed with an intricacy that allows it to guide the player without tutorials: every path carefully drawn, every puzzle panel deliberately placed, every tree planted exactly where it needs to be for you to learn the rules that govern the game's world. However, *Future Unfolding* uses procedural generation to create a landscape for you to explore that's different every time you play. That it manages to cede the level of control that *The Witness* has over its geography, without losing that ability to guide you to comprehension of its rules through clever design is a remarkable achievement.

Though that guiding hand is there, the game feels overwhelming at first. Setting out to explore reveals a place that is daunting in its labyrinthine nature. You inadvertently loop back on yourself. You discover objects but don't know what they do. You accidently teleport yourself to new locations. You trigger events without knowing how or why. Keep exploring and keep experimenting, however, and eventually you start to piece things together.

Those moments where you suddenly understand something about how the game works represent some of its highlights. At times, to return to our previous comparison, it's reminiscent of *The Witness* in its ability to deliver puzzle solutions as delightful epiphanies. However, those crystal-clear flashes of clarity were fundamental to the experience of playing *The Witness* in a way that they are not for *Future Unfolding*. Instead, this is a game that likes to keep you skirting on the edge of comprehension. Partial understanding is often enough to get by and that ensures that the game's myriad secrets and mysteries will remain intact for most after your first playthrough. Become attuned to that opaque nature and it reveals itself as part of the game's appeal. You take a zen approach to progression: understanding will come as it will. You stop worrying about getting lost and instead simply enjoy the liberating feeling of dashing through its delightful painting-like scenes to its meditative music (a feeling rarely spoilt by moments that require a precision the controls fail to support), eager to see what might appear before you next.

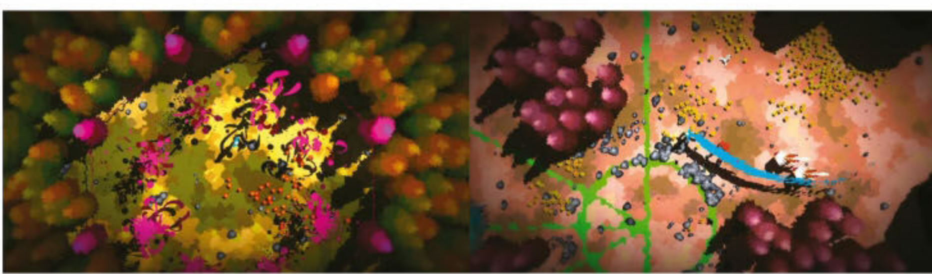
There's what you might describe as a philosophy of play to be found here, then, one that's far superior to the cloying pseudo-philosophy delivered in text by creatures that you encounter on your journey. It rejects the goal-orientated nature of most videogames in favour of play for play's sake, allowing you to enjoy the act of discovery in a way that feels appealingly unprompted and natural.

Above: There are a load of different animals to encounter in *Future Unfolding*. Some are dangerous, but some have abilities that can aid your progress. It's just a matter of working out what they are.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

PROCEDURAL PERFECTION: What feel like set-piece moments are nothing of the sort. Chat to someone else who has finished the game and you'll realise how many unique moments *Future Unfolding*'s procedural system creates.



Above: We'll leave what's happening here up to your imagination, because explaining it would only spoil the process of discovery that makes this game great.



A SMARTLY DESIGNED AND BEAUTIFUL PUZZLE EXPLORATION GAME

SOUL OF A SAMURAI

Nioh

Nioh opens with a pastiche of _Dark Souls_' opening level, with knights and longswords in tow, but after these opening moments the game evolves into something completely its own. The colourful setting of Feudal Japan explores a side of history that we don't often get to see in big-budget games, save for *Samurai Warriors* from Omega Force. This unique art-style and area is what gives *Nioh* its own identity. The levels we find ourselves in are incredibly well thought out, with a level of detail that is scarcely found in many other games.

However, *Nioh* doesn't adopt the open interconnected world of its Medieval European cousin. Instead, the game takes on a mission-based structure, with you taking on new missions in addition to Twilight Missions – harder levels set in areas we've already played with more difficult enemies. These are selected on a world map with a Mission Hub. There's no place of respite in *Nioh* aside from this menu, so not making it a small area with NPC is disappointing, as you never really feel as if you're a real part of the world.

While you'll often find yourself hacking away at ordinary men to begin with, *Nioh* quickly switches it up by putting players to the task of defeating yokai; huge demons that are inspired by Japanese mythology. This creature design is also echoed in the design of the bosses, which are brutally difficult to battle.

Combat itself is based around your health and stamina bar. Like *Monster Hunter* and *Dark Souls* before it, whenever you attack, you commit to the animation, so rushing in is going to get you nowhere against even the weakest enemies. Where *Nioh* sets itself apart is the speed of the combat. With a wide range of weapons like dual katanas and hammers at your disposal, there's a wealth of options to play around with.

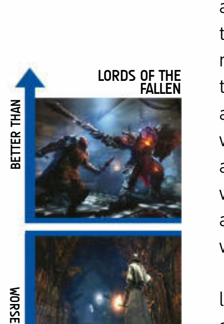
Each weapon also has its own stance, letting you switch between light, medium and heavy options. This gives combat an unprecedented depth. Aided by the character upgrade system, we see Team Ninja's roots in *Ninja Gaiden* influence *Nioh*. You're able to customise skills and upgrade your abilities to create the most optimal build for your character.

Nioh is incredibly difficult; even seasoned veterans of *Bloodborne* and the '*Souls*' series are not in for an easy ride. The 'Ki Purification' system has you replenishing your stamina bar instantly when you time a button-press correctly, but it's very difficult to master when dashing in and around enemies.

While it takes heavy influence from other titles, *Nioh* is undoubtedly exactly what the genre needs. It's a fresh take on systems that players love, with the extra added dash of brutally fast combat and excellent monster design.



FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Team Ninja
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



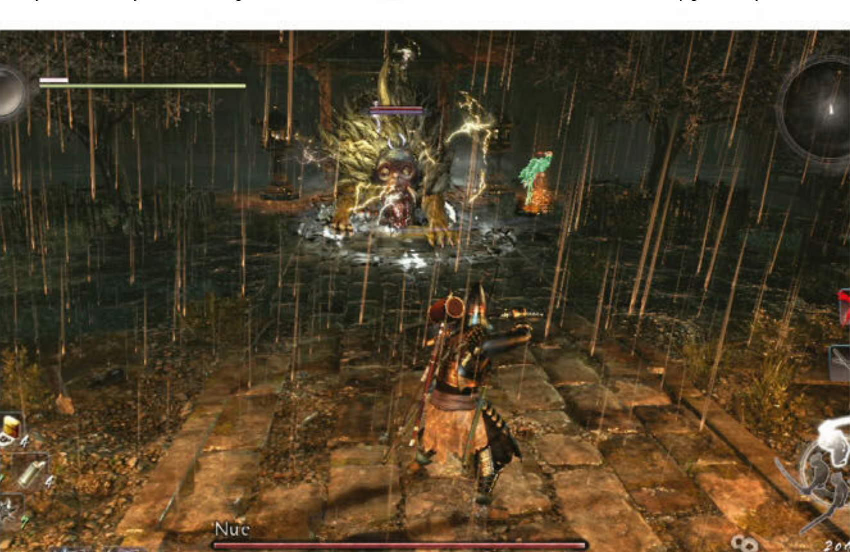
WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

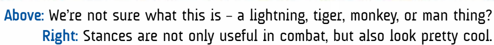
BLOOD FEUD: You can touch the gravestones of fallen players to challenge their spectre to a one-on-one duel. Once they are defeated, you can find rare weapons and armour.



CHALLENGING, BEAUTIFUL AND UNIQUE







Above: We're not sure what this is – a lightning, tiger, monkey, or man thing?
Right: Stances are not only useful in combat, but also look pretty cool.

Sniper Elite 4 really is a beautiful looking game. Running at a smooth 1080p we barely saw a frame drop during our time fighting the Nazis in a lush recreation of the Mediterranean.

WE'RE GONNA BE DOIN' ONE THING AND ONE THING ONLY... KILLIN' NAZIS

Sniper Elite 4

Say what you will about Rebellion's premiere franchise, but there's nothing quite like finding the perfect sniping nest and systematically headshotting Nazis with a flash of X-rays and a burst of viscera. It may be a world away from the faux historical legitimacy of *Medal Of Honor*'s glory days, but *Sniper Elite* has never claimed real world poignancy. It's a sniper's playground, plain and simple, and its fourth outing embraces this mantra to the max.

The studio's decision not to embrace an open-world setup initially feels reductive, but it doesn't take long to get lost in the sheer scope of *SE4*'s maps. Gone are the irritating choke points that forced you to engage enemies head-on, replaced instead by huge locales filled with shortcuts and multiple avenues of access. It's smart game design, enabling you to properly plan and execute, tackling side-missions and main objectives in whichever order you please. It also opens the door to a better use of elevation and distance, with plenty of handy ledges and walkways for scoping and sniping shenanigans.

Let's be clear, this fourth outing isn't some grand transformation for the series. You still sneak around, tagging enemies with your binoculars, using the cover of aircraft or artillery fire to mask the sniper shots that are shredding fascist testicles and livers like there's no tomorrow. *SE4* simply refines its classic recipe: those sniping mechanics now feel tighter, with muzzle velocity and bullet drop making a bigger difference to your shots. There's also a new skill tree to buff your stats, a helpful (if simplified) touch that does at least prompt you to pursue side-missions for more XP.

But where Rebellion hones down *SE4*'s best qualities, it also retains a few familiar gripes that have been hampering the series for generations. The AI inhabiting your new Mediterranean setting aren't as dumb as previous efforts (in fact, the randomisation of patrol patterns between saves and the way officers command squads to investigate noises works really well), but there's still a frustrating inconsistency. For every clued on Nazi there's two more that just stand there waiting to be popped.

You can now tackle the story campaign in co-op, which makes taking on those larger maps a less time-consuming affair with two rifle-toting killers in play. There's also a generic and ultimately forgettable horde-esque Survival mode alongside an enjoyable Overwatch mode that tasks one player with spotting targets for another. *SE4* also packs in some multiplayer modes, but like previous entries, the meticulous nature of its sniping mechanics rarely gels with the inevitable gung-ho nature of PvP.

Those familiar niggles aside, you can't help but fall in love with the pulpy silliness of its WW2 playground. It might not be the slickest third-person shooter, but as a measured, open-ended sniping experience, *SE4* proves shooting Nazis through their X-rayed testes rarely, if ever, gets old.



FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: United Kingdom
PUBLISHER: Rebellion Developments
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-12
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

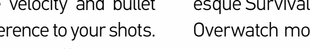
SNIPER ELITE 3



WORSE THAN



MGSV: THE PHANTOM PAIN



IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

X-RAY OF LIGHT: The series' signature X-ray kill cam returns, naturally, only now it's not just sniper rifle shots and vehicle kills getting the treatment. This time around, explosions and melee kills embrace the cross-section of pain.

VERDICT 8/10

A REFINED STEP FORWARDS, BUT NOT A PERFECT ONE

THE TIDES HAVE SHIFTED

Torment: Tides Of Numenera

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Techland Publishing
DEVELOPER: InXile Entertainment
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

It's in playing *Torment: Tides Of Numenera* that you'll be reminded of a forgotten age of gaming. Not because it's birthed from the cult classic *Torment: Planescape*, nor that its gameplay favours the more archaic, text-heavy form of gaming. Instead it's because - for the first time in an era - *Tides Of Numenera* is not just an RPG, but a role-playing game. It's not a game solely about raising stats and unlocking abilities, though that does still remain a key part of the experience. It's not a game about numbers, though everything you do is tied to the underlying mathematics. It's not even a game about combat and your party's progressively growing strength throughout the game, though battle will be an inevitability. It is, however, a game about your decisions, your character and their place within the world.

You'll start somewhat ambiguously, falling through darkness as you slowly discover who you are and what's happening. What begins is a series of decisions to form your character, but it all ties into a larger story: you are the Changing God, or one of his castoffs, or perhaps neither. It's a mystery and one whose truth you're left to decide about from the very beginning. Will you stride into the role, declaring yourself a deity both loved and despised? Or will you hide the fact, keeping your strength and powers concealed from the world? It's a game that revolves around how you choose to interact with it, thanks in equal parts to the way the world reacts to your decisions and how your responses form a greater sense of the kind of character you are – the kind of role you're playing.

A rather imaginative system for all this is the Effort mechanics, a set of numbers for any given character's ability in Might, Speed and Intellect. These stats can be used in the turn-based combat, increasing your hit chance, damage, distance moved and so on. It's a finite resource that can be increased and restored once it's gone, meaning you'll need to balance its use throughout any given melee. But combat is such a minimal part of *Tides Of Numenera*, with the biggest part of the game emphasising exploration, dialogue and decision-making. Yet Effort must be spent here, too, through conversation or interactions with the environment, making this system a clever blending of both core aspects of the game.

It's worth knowing before you go into this new *Torment* that, like its ancestor, this is a title that revolves around morality in a grey area, and as such it is very much the text-heavy mammoth it seeks to replicate. It's a slow starter too, but put in the hours and it won't be long before you'll be drawn into it, not simply because of its intricate RPG systems, but as much for the depth of its storytelling, writing and role-playing.

Above: The emotive, descriptive writing really helps to flesh out the universe, and you'll spend as much of the game absorbing its lore as you will speaking with characters. There's less in the way of voice acting, however, so much so it can be jarring to actually hear a voice.



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BRAINS OR BRAWN: While there are opportunities to turn a conversation into a battle, *Tides Of Numenera* is a little too focused on dialogue and misses out on the true flexibility of the Effort system as a result.

BETTER THAN: TYRANNY

AS GOOD AS: PILLARS OF ETERNITY

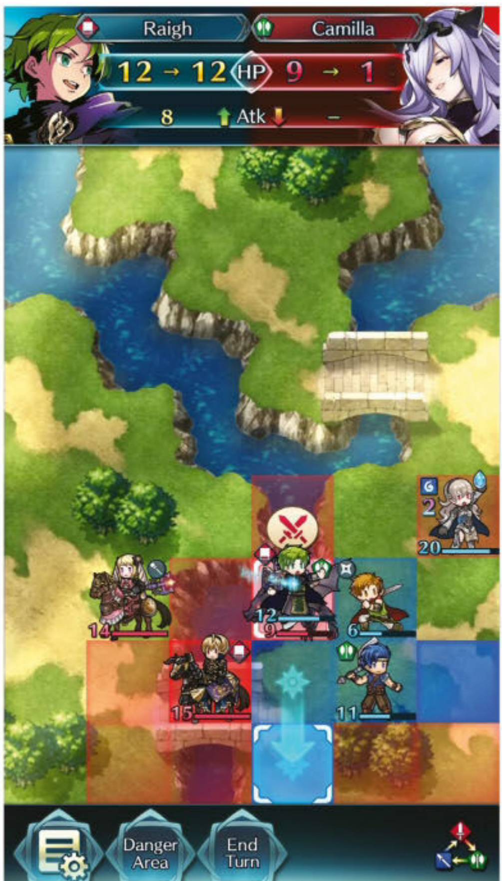


Above: On PS4 there are a few technical issues. The visuals are surprisingly low-grade, especially considering they're not exactly benchmark graphics on PC either. That's forgivable, but it's the seemingly random juttering that occurs on PS4 that frustrates the most.





Below: Each hero can have a different skill. One of Corrin's skills, for example, is Dragon Gaze, which triggers +30% on attack, just like on this unsuspecting cavalier.







JUST FOR ONE DAY

Fire Emblem Heroes

For a series known for its strong narrative and relationship building between characters, you'd think that Intelligent Systems would incorporate more than just the tactical RPG core for *Fire Emblem Heroes*.

Indeed condensing *Fire Emblem* down to its basics means an almost nonexistent *Heroes* plot that vaguely links to the series' recurring trope of 'royal family must fight against imposing force'.

This isn't entirely a caveat though, as the straightforward story works hand in glove with incredibly simple gameplay. There are two teams of up to four heroes on each side, battling on an eight by six grid. Drag the heroes across the grid in one, two or three squares each time to fight and that's really it.

No items, no Master Seals and no cutscenes. Fans of *Fire Emblem* will appreciate encountering characters from the series' past and recruiting them for their team. On the other hand, newbies to the game will be indifferent to the large quantity of heroes on offer with every summon.

You can kind of strategise each character's move by taking into account classes and 'colours' - though the size of the grid and the limited number of heroes taking part in each battle means that, ultimately, any truly tactical play is sacrificed in favour of sheer simplicity.

That's not to say that the game is featureless though. If Story mode leaves you wanting you can always give Arena Duels a go for testing teams against real players, or enter Special Maps to try to recruit special characters for a limited time only. The Trainer Tower is also a good challenge, with increasingly strong enemies on varying team rotas, but being confined to randomly summoned heroes means that you're likely to be using the Tower to grind up new summons – a situation we found ourselves in quite early on in the game. It's this process that puts the freemium aspect of *Heroes* front and centre, because unless you spend hours training lesser characters, it's unlikely for you to succeed round after round without attaining a five-starred hero via purchased Orbs. Granted, for a mobile game *Heroes* already has plenty of free content and ready-to-play features on release that go beyond a couple of minutes of gaming.

To be fair, there's nothing wrong with stripping *Fire Emblem* down to its quintessential core. However, *Heroes* is so basic that it leaves us feeling rather unfulfilled and reaching out for our full, handheld versions instead.

FINGERPRINT

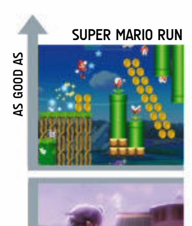
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

NOSTALGIA: Bringing back so many of the old characters from some of *Fire Emblem*'s much loved main series games into one tidy mobile package is pretty exciting.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Android
OTHER FORMATS: iOS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Intelligent Systems
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS: SUPER MARIO RUN



WORSE THAN: FIRE EMBLEM FATES

VERDICT 6/10

SOLID BEGINNER GAME, BUT PERHAPS TOO CASUAL



"It's a game that I've certainly played more than any other"
RON GILBERT, CO-FOUNDER, TERRIBLE TOYBOX

WHY I ❤...

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

RON GILBERT
CO-FOUNDER, TERRIBLE TOYBOX

I really love World Of Warcraft*, it's a game that I've certainly played more than any other. It gets back to this sense of place; the reason I fell in love with the* World Of Warcraft *when I first started playing it – and this was something Blizzard did very differently from* EverQuest *and some of the other MMOs – was that it was this giant, continuous world. There were no loading screens, and I was just marvelled at the time by my ability to walk from one end of this massive continent to the other and just never see a loading screen any of the time – that just completely blew me away. I became really sucked into the world and the lore, and with just how much time Blizzard spent making sure every little thing had a story and was all inter-connected. I really respected that a lot.*



RETRO

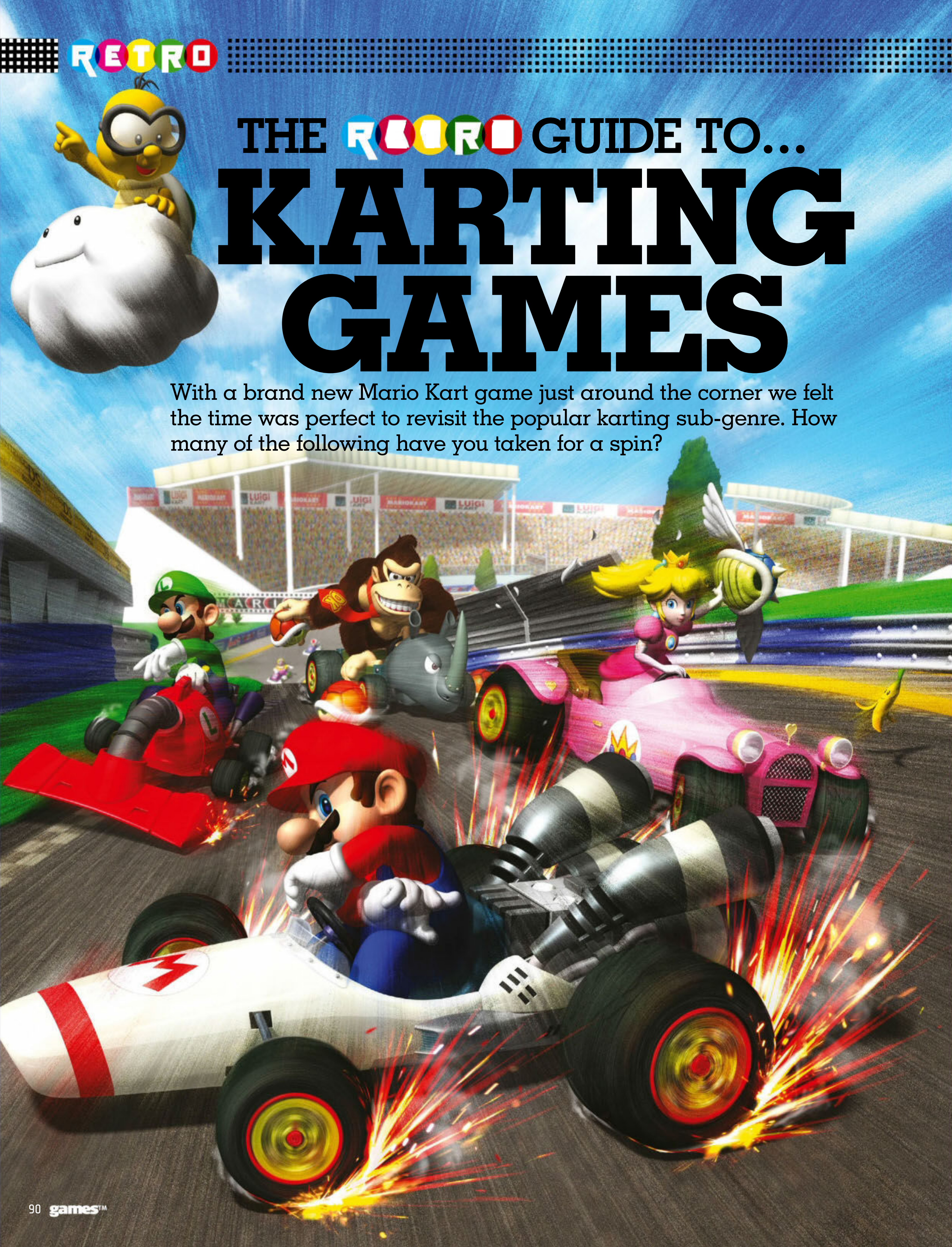
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THE RETRO GUIDE TO... KARTING GAMES

With a brand new Mario Kart game just around the corner we felt the time was perfect to revisit the popular karting sub-genre. How many of the following have you taken for a spin?



KART RACERS ARE some of the most fun you can have on four wheels. Typically based around intense multiplayer battles and featuring a colourful collections of characters (who often have unique abilities and different stats) they represent fantastic fun for the vast majority of gamers and always go down well in multiplayer sessions.

While it wasn't the first karting game to appear, Nintendo's *Super Mario Kart* nevertheless kick-started a template that many other games would and continue to emulate. In short it started everything. With so many colourful characters appear in Nintendo's classic game, it's perhaps inevitable that so many other karting games would go on to use licences, from *Looney Toons* and *Star Wars*, to *The Muppets* and M&Ms. Popular mascots like Crash Bandicoot and Sonic The Hedgehog have also tried their luck, with varying degrees of success. Join us then as we look at the many *Mario Kart* games that have evolved the genre and the notable successes and failures that followed in *Super Mario Kart*'s speedy wake.





WACKY WHEELS 1994

PC

The success of *Super Mario Kart* meant that many copycat clones quickly followed. One of the most interesting was this early effort from Beavis Soft, which featured escaped zoo animals and collectibles in the form of bombs and hedgehogs. Originally distributed as shareware, it was rereleased on Steam in 2015 and received a sequel the following year.





POWER DRIFT 1988

ARCADE, VARIOUS

While the *Mario Kart* series has refined the popular sub-genre, it's actually this arcade gem from Sega that really kick-started things. When it was released in 1988 there was quite literally nothing else like it on the market, and it's still a fantastic racer today, as its recent 3DS rerelease testifies. Unlike other racers of the time, *Power Drift* featured over-sized go-karts, a roster of colourful male and female characters to choose from and ridiculously elaborate elevated tracks that would put most roller coasters to shame. Fast and furious with an excellent soundtrack, its success in the arcades led to a whole number of home conversions.





SUPER MARIO KART 1992

SNES

Everything about modern karting games can be found in this spectacular debut. Its motley selection of classic *Mario* characters are varied and cater to different playing styles, while the tracks are extremely well designed and offer clever shortcuts for the skilled player. *Super Mario Kart* introduced a large number of defensive and offensive items, which have been copied ever since and features different difficulty classes in the form of 50, 100 and 150cc groups. While its multiplayer and Battle Mode only catered for two players, the incredible track design meant many spent ages in Time Trial mode, desperately trying to shave seconds off their high scores, thanks to the clever power-sliding and hopping mechanics the game featured. It might not have been the first karting game, but it laid the groundwork for everything that followed.



SONIC DRIFT 1994

GAME GEAR

It was inevitable that Sega would want to cash in on the success of Nintendo's *Super Mario Kart* with an alternative starring its own mascot. Sadly, *Sonic* stalled on the starting line and it proves that simply copying a game is completely different from understanding how it actually works. While *Sonic Drift* featured a strong variety of different characters, it was let down by a weak selection of power-ups and some truly dire track design. Stick to the (slightly better) 1995 sequel instead.

STREET RACER 1994

VARIOUS

Vivid Image's chaotic racer was the first big contender to *Super Mario Kart*'s throne. Well received at the time, the biggest difference to the gameplay was that characters could hit each other, similar to EA's *Road Rash*, in addition to using power-ups or items that were scattered across the imaginatively designed race tracks. In addition to its lengthy Championship Mode, *Street Racer* also featured "Rumble", where players had to smash each other out of an arena, and the excellent "Soccer" offering a crazy game of football. Originally released as a Super Nintendo exclusive, it was eventually released on everything from the Amiga to the PlayStation.





XTREME RACING 1995

AMIGA

While it only ran on AGA systems like the Amiga 1200 and 4000, and featured standard looking cars, this was still one of the best examples of the genre on Amiga, beating *Street Racer* by a good two years. It features Battle Modes, offensive pick-ups and 12 impressive looking tracks to race across, but it lacked the personality of Nintendo's racer and *Street Racer*. Its advantage compared to similar games was that up to 8 players could compete at once on two linked Amigas.







ATARI KARTS 1995

JAGUAR

The bland kart racer for Atari's Jaguar tries hard, but simply can't cut it in the fun stakes. While it was nice to have plenty of fan service in the form of classic characters like Bentley Bear and cups named after classic Atari arcade games, the gameplay itself was a little too pedestrian. It was competent enough from a graphical standpoint, with lovely smooth gameplay, but the weak AI and uninteresting power-ups made it dull to play.



MARIO KART 64 1996

N64



Nintendo's second *Mario Kart* game is perhaps the most polarising game in the series. While the move to 3D allowed for many subtle improvements to the gameplay due to track elevation and the addition of pits and walls, many felt that the wider tracks made the game less about skill and more focused towards party play. It's also responsible for one of the franchise's most despised power-ups, namely the Spiny Shell, which will chase down whoever is in the top position and requires careful reading to play around. Its biggest addition to the series was the excellent multiplayer mode that catered for four players at a time.

> "MARIO KART 64 IS PERHAPS THE MOST POLARISING GAME"





DIDDY KONG RACING 1997

N64

While it's perhaps not as polished as Nintendo's racer, it was far more imaginative, with an amazing Adventure Mode that featured frantic races against giant bosses and saw the player having to collect a series of balloons to unlock new areas. It was also notable for adding brand new vehicles in the form of hovercrafts and airplanes, which dramatically altered the routes you could take on certain levels. Originally intended as a sequel to Rare's earlier *Pro-Am* games, Rare added Diddy Kong for stronger brand awareness. While a planned sequel was cancelled for the GameCube, an enhanced update with improved graphics and the ability to create racetracks was released for the DS in 2007.





CHOCOBO RACING 1997

PLAYSTATION

It's not the greatest racer, but this *Final Fantasy*-based karting game has some nice touches. There's plenty of variety to the characters and track designs, while it was possible to choose a specific power-up before you started play. The presentation throughout was excellent, particularly in "Story Mode" where it takes the form of a pop-up book narrated by Cid, but there's very little substance to it.



CRASH TEAM RACING 1999

PLAYSTATION

Coded by Naughty Dog, *Crash Team Racing* featured familiar karting tropes such as power-ups, characters of different abilities and intense multiplayer battles, but also added new ideas of its own. Smashing through crates containing "Wumpa Fruit" would enhance weapons and considerably increase a player's kart speed if ten were collected, while carefully timed powersliding would allow the player to perform up to three crucial speed boosts. Well received at the time, two rather average non-Naughty Dog sequels followed in 2003 and 2005.

LOONY TUNES SPACE RACE 2000

DREAMCAST, PS2

Held in high acclaim at the time of its release on account of its excellent cel-shaded aesthetics, *Looney Tunes Space Race* was a solid sequel that effortlessly captured the cartoon antics of its iconic racers. It featured a large number of different play modes, had a host of satisfying weapons to use and granted the player ACME tokens that could be used to unlock additional tracks, characters and artwork. Initially planned for the N64, it launched as a Dreamcast exclusive, eventually finding its way onto PS2 two years later.





LEE SCHUNEMAN INTERVIEW

The Rare producer on how a RC Pro-Am sequel became Diddy Kong Racing



How did the game start off?

We didn't have much playable, but Lee Musgrave had come up with a woolly mammoth riding on a moped for some random reason and Chris Stamper decided we should stop doing [an] RTS and make a racer instead. Chris Stamper – who was software engineering on the RTS – made the decision, and that was it! We started it in probably August/September 1996. A decision was made that this game was going to be Rare published rather than Nintendo published, hence using a Rare IP for the name. *RC Pro-Am* had been successful – having a name that people recognise always helps.

Were you influenced by *Mario Kart 64*?

We hadn't seen *Mario Kart 64*, all of my inspirations were *Mario Kart* on the SNES and *Mario 64*.

How did you create the different tracks?

It all comes back to the core concept of this being a platformer world, but with racing, so of course there needed to be fire world, desert world [and] snow world – all the usual suspects! All the designs were done on paper. I would sketch them out and then one of the artists would build them in polygons. We'd get them into the game engine fast and start driving around. We would go back and forth, a little fine-tuning, and then I would have a tool that enabled me to edit props. The key to each track was that we played every one until [it was] perfect.

Tell us about the design of the early tracks.

There were four 'lanes' – kind of like *Scalectrix* – and each lane was a different path around the track, some fast and others slow. As you drove around you were 'rubber banded' to the other AI so they always felt close. However, for the highly skilled, we broke the rubber band so the others couldn't catch you up.

What did Nintendo think of the game when it was finally released?

My main memory is the reaction to the Tick Tock character for time trial – Miyamoto liked him! I imagine it was at this time that the Diddy Kong conversations happened with Nintendo and the Stampers. We had a great game with *Pro-Am 64*, but with the name change and marketing dollars it became a five-million seller. We were proud of the impact in Japan where I believe it went to number one.



WACKY RACES 2000

VARIOUS



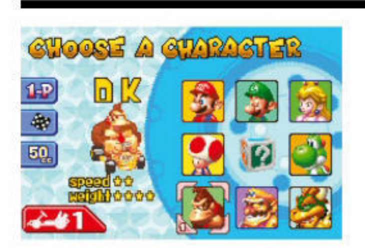
Hanna-Barbara's classic cartoon series was perfect fodder for turning into a *Mario Kart* clone and several sequels followed in the intervening years, with the last being 2008's *Wacky Races: Crash And Dash*. Like the earlier *Loony Tunes* racers, which also suited the genre, *Wacky Races* didn't add anything particular new, being a solid racer with the usual Arcade and Battle Modes. Its saving graces were the Wacky Racers themselves, who were all voiced by actors such as Billy West and Jim Cummings.

KONAMI CRAZY RACERS 2001

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Konami beat Nintendo to the punch by getting this fun kart racer out for the Game Boy Advance's launch. Essentially a carbon copy of *Super Mario Kart*, Konami's game featured classic characters such as Goemon, Gray Fox and TwinBee's Pastel, smart Mode 7-styled graphics and the ability to jump, to add maneuverability. Like *Super Mario Kart*, *Crazy Racers* featured a coin system, but they were used to buy items from a shop between races. There were a variety of offensive and defensive items that could be picked up from red bells, while blue bells gave the player a temporary boost in speed.







MARIO KART SUPER CIRCUIT 2001

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Many purists believe this is the best *Mario Kart* game in the series and it's hard to argue with them. Coded by Intelligent Systems, it's a brilliantly designed racer that moved away from the wider roads of the N64 game in favour of tighter, smartly designed tracks. It brought back *Super Mario Kart*'s coin mechanic, continued to distribute the characters across different weight classes and once again featured a variety of game modes, including the new Quick Run that let a player tackle tracks with a custom rule set. Best of all, every single SNES track could be unlocked, offering tremendous value for money.



MARIO KART: DOUBLE DASH 2003

GAMECUBE



The unique selling point of *Double Dash* was that the player controlled two racers. One would drive the vehicle, while the other dropped items behind the kart; with the player being able to switch between the two characters at will. It was a neat addition to the series, and was further enhanced by the fact that it was the first (and only) game in the series to allow for cooperative play. Each kart is also different to each other, further adding to the game's challenge. *Double Dash* was one of the few GameCube games at the time that made use of Nintendo's Broadband Adapter (allowing for up to 16 players to compete) while the power-sliding of earlier games had been greatly improved. It also included two unique gameplay Battle Modes: Shine Thief and Bob-omb Blast and is the last *Mario Kart* game to only include new stages.



DIGIMON RACING 2003

GAME BOY ADVANCE

This unusual racer is worth covering as it was the first *Digimon* game to be handled by a western developer, Griptonite Games. Its notable gameplay mechanics include the ability to "kart hop", which allowed players to jump onto other characters and slow them down, and the fact that the riders could slowly evolve into more powerful forms of Digimon, gaining powerful new abilities along the way. It's otherwise a pretty generic racer with admittedly nice Mode 7-styled visuals and a variety of gameplay modes.

BANJO-PILOT 2005

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Originally planned as a *Diddy Kong Racing* sequel with innovative tilt controls, the popular primates were replaced with characters from the Banjo universe after Rare was sold to Microsoft. The end result was a fun racing game in the style of its predecessor with a variety of fun gameplay modes and plenty of varied tracks.





MARIO KART WII 2008

WII

Many laughed at *Mario Kart Wii* as it utilised motion controls for steering and came packaged with a plastic steering wheel, which many claimed was gimmicky. The proof was in the proverbial pudding though, as Nintendo's game played exceptionally well, particularly if you were using the new motorbikes that had been added. Complemented by a solid online mode and an excellent Battle Mode, it became a huge success for Nintendo, selling over 36 million units in the process.





MARIO KART 7 2008

3DS

In addition to looking rather funky in 3D, *Mario Kart* 7 saw Nintendo diversifying its racing mechanics by adding flying and underwater sections. It also added kart customisation to the mix, and saw the return of the classic coin system, which had been missing since *Mario Kart: Super Circuit*. Like many recent *Mario Karts* it features both brand new and retro tracks, but unlike earlier releases it added a brand new first-person mode.

SONIC & ALL-STARS RACING TRANSFORMED 2012

VARIOUS

As good as Sumo Digital's original game was; it's not a patch on its incredible sequel. Karts were able to transform into planes and ships, its power-ups were far better balanced, while the sprawling campaign mode was filled with goodies to unlock. Best of all though, was the sensational track design that saw entire levels transform over the course of play, pushing the player and their vehicles to the limit. It remains untouchable from a fan service point of view, too.



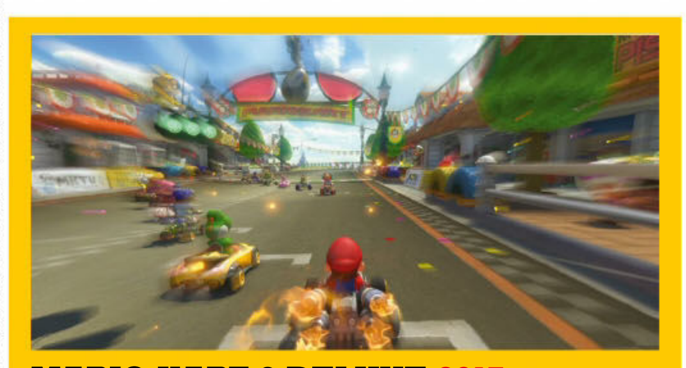


MARIO KART 8 2014

WII U

Cross *Mario Kart* with Nintendo's long forgotten *F-Zero* series and this was the result. It's an excellent addition to the series thanks to its anti-gravity sections that let Mario and company race across walls and ceilings, which greatly opened up its gameplay. It had the strongest online functionality of any *Mario Kart* to date and was impressively bolstered by some incredible DLC that added 16 additional tracks and six more characters.





MARIO KART 8 DELUXE 2017

SWITCH

While it's technically not a new game there's still plenty of reasons to be excited about this incoming Switch release. It features all the excellent DLC from its Wii U predecessor, offers additional new power-ups, including the classic feather, adds a further five characters and considerably enhances the original's disappointing Battle Mode.

BEHIND THE SCENES

The Hobbit

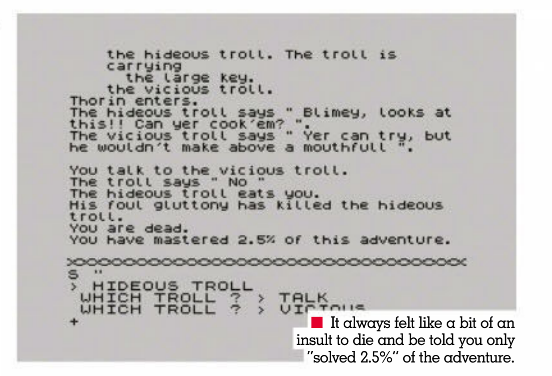
games™ explores how this historic release paved the way for adventure games and established the genre norms we've come to expect



Released: 1982
Format: ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64, BBC Micro, Apple II, PC
Publisher: Melbourne House
Developer: Krome Studios Melbourne
Key Staff: Veronika Megler (Programmer, Designer), Phil Mitchell (Programmer, Designer)

THE TERM 'INNOVATION' IS AN EASY ONE TO USE WHEN IT COMES TO THE EARLIEST DAYS OF VIDEOGAMES. It was the pioneering age of the industry, and practically every game that was released during this initial period offered something new and novel by sheer virtue of the fact that there hadn't actually been anything like it before. And while so many of these games would go on to create a heritage that long outgrew their initial popularity, fewer titles can claim to be quite as ahead of their time as easily as *The Hobbit* could. At a point in gaming history when adventure games provided little more than text and a series of decisions to make, *The Hobbit* was an adventure that sought to do so much more.

"The original instruction was to build the best adventure game ever," says Veronika Megler, one of two key developers on *The Hobbit* and the game's primary designer and programmer. It had been the CEO of game publisher Melbourne Mouse that had dreamt up the objective, but the details of how that game would take form would come from the fledgling developers he would hire for the game that – at the earliest stage – was never even originally focused on Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. With the broad yet daunting task at hand, Megler – then a student at Melbourne University and the first programmer on the project – first set to work on creating the initial systems to power what would become a well-loved adventure classic. "It was just going to be an adventure game with some story as yet undefined," explains Megler. "And then as we progressed and started building out what you would call the game engine these days, we got to the point where we needed a story, we needed a theme to animate the characters and give the game itself some personality. I don't remember how we ended up at *The Hobbit* as a choice. I know we were all *Lord Of The Rings* fans, all of us, and I know *Lord Of The Rings* itself was too big and complicated an idea for us, particularly for version one."



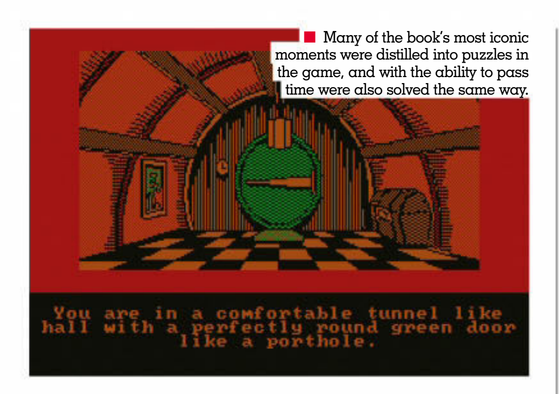
■ It always felt like a bit of an insult to die and be told you only "solved 2.5%" of the adventure.

In aiming to make the "greatest adventure game ever," Megler looked to what had frustrated her about the games she was playing at the time, and how she would personally prefer such a game to play out. "I had been playing a classic adventure game on Unix as part of university that starts out as the maze of twisty passages and you find the troll and he's in one location only and doesn't move and the dragon's in one location and only does one thing and once you've solved that game once... I was done. I was like, 'okay, I've got the map of twisty passages, and now I'm bored'. And so I really designed the game in reaction to what bored me about that game." This led to the initial basis for the gameplay itself, says Megler, while a class on the basics of abstractions acted as the spark that helped her begin coding the concept of an adaptable game engine. "I really liked the idea of doing a map that I could modify and I could just replace it with a different map and have a different game, and characters that I could just replace and have a different game or change the characters if they bored me."

THE ORIGINAL INSTRUCTION WAS TO BUILD THE BEST ADVENTURE GAME EVER

With the initial work on the game done, more hands were needed and Alfred Milburn, CEO of the game's publisher Melbourne House, started looking for another programmer to help Megler out. It was Megler's classmate, Phil Mitchell, who would be brought on, the two working together on this complex title. Megler designed the core gameplay, she explains, as well as creating the landscape, the characters and the puzzles themselves. Mitchell, meanwhile, tackled the inclusion of the visuals that were added into the game and coded the language that allowed players to control the game's actions. "So we ended up with literally half of the game each," says Megler, "and we had some very clearly defined interface between them where he would take complicated English sentences and turn them into a much simpler sequence of the action, occasionally with a strength associated with it that he would hand to me and I would take those actions and then implement them in the game and then carry the game forward."

■ The images might be crude to look at now through a modern lens, but at the time they were very impressive.



■ Many of the book's most iconic moments were distilled into puzzles in the game, and with the ability to pass time were also solved the same way.

It was through these initial design elements and a working game engine that much of *The Hobbit*'s innovative elements were created. Features like real-time gameplay, randomised moments, NPCs that would react to the world on their own even outside of player interaction and the interpreter that allowed gamers to solve the puzzles through more intricate sentences beyond just verb and noun combinations were unheard of, especially for adventure games. "Phil was doing a new thing with the English interpreter," explains Megler, "so all of the messages were encoded and we had a dictionary of words and the messages were pointers to where in the dictionary they were and he was using extra bits that weren't used for the alphabet to encode things like 'Was this an object? Was this a subject? Was this a verb? What kind of ending did this verb take when it was pluralised in case you happened to have more than one subject?' He was doing the same kinds of ideas, but he was doing that with the messages and the whole idea of expanding the way that you could interact with the user." It was this 'Inglish' – as it was known – that allowed for a much greater depth, emergence and personal input from the player, a feature that would go on to be one of the defining aspects of *The Hobbit*. "I was setting up a set of conditions that had to be true in order for the puzzle to be solved," adds Megler about how these emergent puzzles were designed, "and once they were met the puzzle was solved as opposed to requiring you to take a sequence of steps. And I didn't realise it at the time, that just happened to be the way I thought about the puzzles themselves, and it made coding it simpler because I didn't have to keep track of a workflow in essence, I could just check to see if these four things were true and then if so the puzzle was solved."

In addition to this unique means of puzzle solving, Megler also wanted to find a way for the game's NPCs to take part in the adventure themselves, to – in her words – "go off and do their own thing". This, again, was down to frustrations she'd had with other games, text adventures especially, where everything was all too staid. "One of the things that I knew that annoyed me was that the characters were very static and did not interact with you, only in a predefined way and that they did not interact with each other. One of the things that I absolutely loved about *The Hobbit* was when the characters all took off and started playing the game themselves. At one level, I programmed it and at another level the characters programmed themselves. I've read this about some authors of epics, that you start out and you create the characters but there's a point

INTO THE WILDERLAND

THE PROJECT THAT GAVE A LITTLE INSIGHT ON HOW THE HOBBIT WORKED

It's tough to talk about how significant some of the features of *The Hobbit* truly were – partly due to the fact that a modern audience might find it easy to overlook the archaic visuals and many of the faults that older gamers would recognise of having to deal with machines like the ZX Spectrum. One diehard fan, however, has released an emulated version of *The Hobbit* named *Wilderland* that highlighted precisely how those complex systems that made the game so innovative worked.

1 PLAYING ITSELF

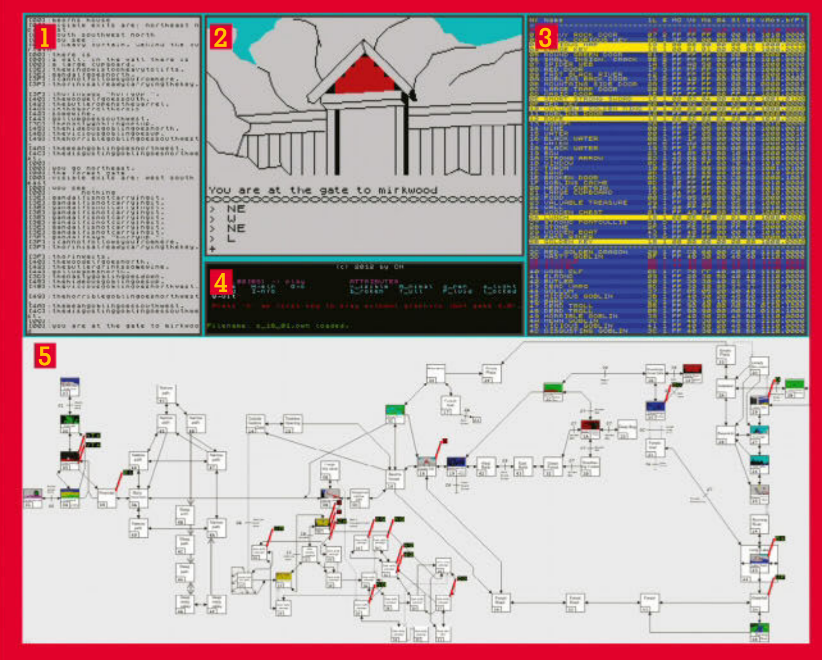
One of the interesting changes in *The Hobbit* was that the game would play out by itself. Even doing nothing was doing something, and while that would never solve the puzzle, it was possible to wait and use the game's characters – who would take actions separately from your own – to progress the game. This is what made the game feel so alive, which wasn't ever done before *The Hobbit*.

2 VISUAL AID

Adventure games at the time were almost exclusively text-based, or with crude images drawn from keyboard characters. The inclusion of images in *The Hobbit* was an unexpected addition that did add more to the experience but slowed the gameplay down considerably as players had to wait for the low-power machines of the time to draw those images out.

3 CHECKLIST

The complexity of *The Hobbit* was actually not complex at all. Megler tells us she prefers simple systems working together to make complex results, and instead everything – whether that was objects or characters – existed in a table that included their own strength, weight, thickness or what have you that could then be utilised by the command system to know how successful an action could be.



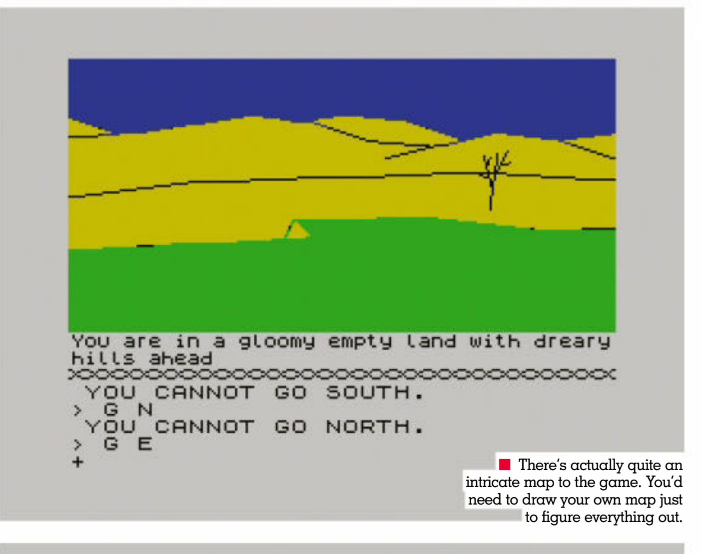
4 YOUR COMMAND

The Hobbit wasn't the first adventure game to take commands from the player, but since its puzzles could be solved in a number of ways it was important that many different options worked. This is where the Inglish translator came in handy, Mitchell's system that took the meanings of different sentences and applied it to potential actions. It was flawed, of course, but also incredibly impressive.

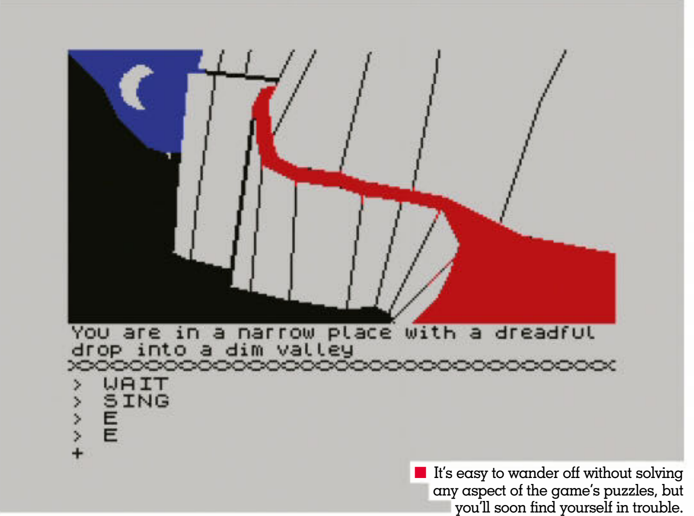
5 THROR'S MAP

There's a lot to consider when navigating *The Hobbit*'s game world, especially when many of the game's characters and animals will travel to other areas in the game without any assistance on your behalf. This can make tracking them tricky, but *Wilderland* offers at least an option to monitor all those movements.

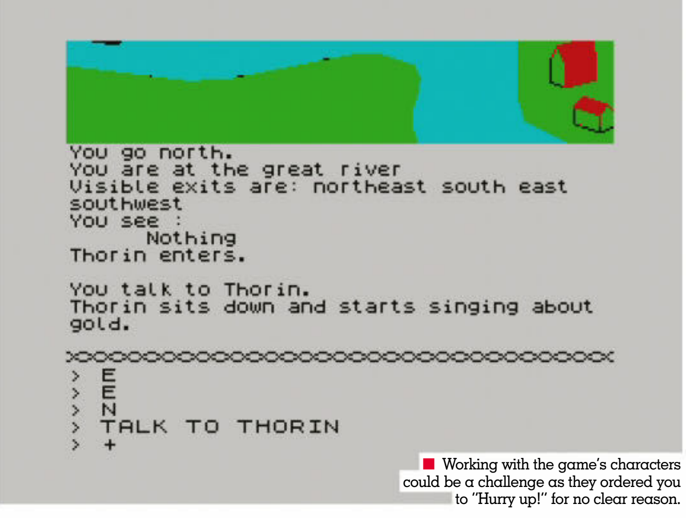




There's actually quite an intricate map to the game. You'd need to draw your own map just to figure everything out.



It's easy to wander off without solving any aspect of the game's puzzles, but you'll soon find yourself in trouble.



Working with the game's characters could be a challenge as they ordered you to "Hurry up!" for no clear reason.

WHAT THEY SAID…

It is one of the most complex games for the Sinclair computer I have seen and that is one of the reasons it is selling so well

Sinclair User 1983

where the characters take over and start creating and running the story themselves. And with *The Hobbit* I had that same feeling, I guess that was the original part of the emergence, it had that same feeling of one day I'm busy coding characters and then all of a sudden I am running behind trying to catch up."

This created a fascinating way of playing a text adventure. Suddenly there was so much more than objective puzzle solving, and instead a little more cognitive thought could be used – by the players themselves – to decide upon and discover a solution themselves. Even to this day so many adventure games still utilise a checklist of options for the solutions to their puzzles, a find-the-right-object sort of method to their conundrums that often require little more than persistent clicking to discover the solution. *The Hobbit* fixed this problem before it even became the tired issue it is today, by making every item in the game world a physical object with its own weight. This meant it was possible to use anything that player character could see – even the body of a troll – as a potential solution to a puzzle. Perhaps you'll hide in a barrel and have it thrown through a door? Or use another character's body as a weapon? The options, while still limited, gave a far greater deal of freedom than anything available at the time. "We were constantly getting messages from people who were writing us about bugs and saying 'I did the following thing and then the program crashed'. We had no idea, it had never crossed my mind that somebody would try and do these things, so part of it was that the game did become famous for its bugs but that was because it allowed so much latitude that no other games did."

THE IMAGES ANNOYED ME SO MUCH THE FIRST THING I GOT PHIL TO DO WAS TO PUT IN A SWITCH SO I COULD TURN THEM OFF

> **WHAT THEY SAID…**
>
> Artificial intelligence of a kind enlivens the action as the characters continue their lives regardless of what you do… some even getting killed without you knowing about it until you find their bodies!
>
> **Crash 184**

Perhaps the biggest issue in developing such an open-ended approach to puzzle solving, then, was the ignorance to anything like the rigorous testing needed in videogames these days. "Back then it was a part-time job," says Megler of the early days of videogame development, "there was no industry. All of the glamour that exists now around the games industry didn't exist then because there was no industry. I mean, Melbourne House was the first games company in Australia, or close to, and it was an off-the-wall hobby that people had that was written up in hobby magazines. It wasn't any kind of profession at all." There was no consideration for a testing department of any sorts, and though an extra pair of hands were brought in later on to test the game, the majority of it had all been done by Megler and Mitchell under circumstances that were not ideal. "Initially it was just me and Phil and towards the end we hired another student whose job was testing. He found a bunch of stuff. The core of it was us initially and this was back in the days where there were no test harnesses. So we were using VI, coding assembler by hand, running it through an assembler and then running it through the program to see what happened. And if you are doing that with something where everything is randomised and you have no debugged capabilities… I'm amazed the thing actually worked as well as it did." *The Hobbit* would go on to become infamous for its bugs, the varied potential options of the game a key factor in that. But it was equally famous for those possibilities, at once highlighting how much control a player could have over interactive fiction but suffering because of it. Later games would learn to grow and expand on that, but this wasn't the only way the game innovated, either. "It was one of those random ideas that you throw around jokingly over coffee but then you go off and implement," says Megler, "which I've discovered is actually how the best ideas actually happen." Megler explains that the addition of images to the game had never been a focus from the start, simply an off-the-cuff suggestion that would go on to define the title. "We had also written *Scrambler* at the same time, in between writing *The Hobbit*. And that was a pure visual game, and so we had done a fair amount of programming that included visuals but it was seen as being a separate kind of game with no crossover."

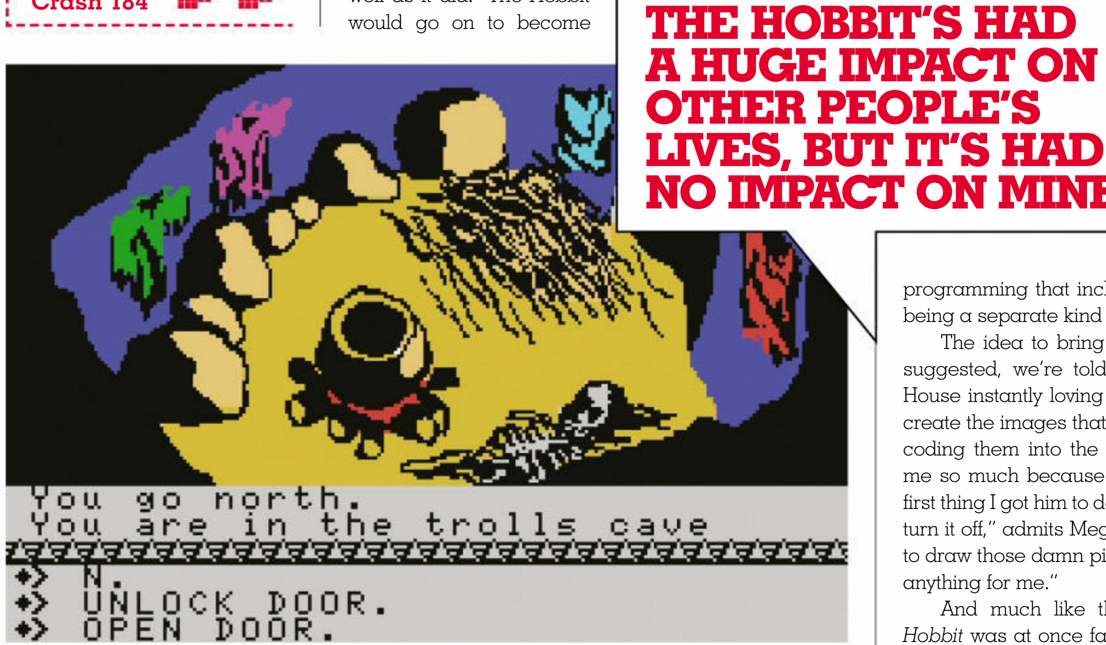
```
You see :
    the large key.
Thorin enters.

You go southeast.
Rivendell
Visible exits are: east west
You see :
    Elrond. Elrond is carrying
      a curious map.
Thorin enters.

You talk to Elrond.
Thorin says " Hurry up ".
Elrond examines the curious map.
Elrond says " Go east from Long lake to
get to Lake town ".

 YOU CANNOT GO NORTH.
>  PAUSE
>  SAY TO ELROND "READ MAP"
>  PAUSE
+
```

The game's characters were mostly scripted to take actions roughly every 30 seconds, which could mean you were left behind.



> **THE HOBBIT'S HAD A HUGE IMPACT ON OTHER PEOPLE'S LIVES, BUT IT'S HAD NO IMPACT ON MINE**

The idea to bring visuals over to *The Hobbit* was suggested, we're told, with the owner of Melbourne House instantly loving the idea and hiring someone to create the images that would be included, with Mitchell coding them into the existing project. "They annoyed me so much because they drew so slowly so that the first thing I got him to do was to put in a switch so I could turn it off," admits Megler, "so I didn't have to wait for it to draw those damn pictures every time. It wasn't doing anything for me."

And much like the open-ended gameplay, *The Hobbit* was at once famous for including such a novel

A SHORT TALE

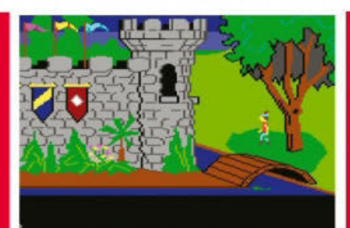
Megler's time working with games was brief, would she have stayed if an industry existed?

"I HAVE A REAL challenge with boredom. I have a maximum of three times that I can stand to do something before I go stark raving mad. And just programming – I get bored programming after a while too, there's not enough variety in it. Another one is that I've talked with a couple of people that have specialised in the field since then, and it's what do you do to top *The Hobbit*? Pretty much the rest of the history of text adventures were various extensions or attempts to re-create *The Hobbit*. And the third thing that would've driven me out eventually is the sexism. One of the reasons I stopped being quite so hidden was that I got so mad about the fact that everyone was crediting Phil as the author of *The Hobbit* and I was written off as somebody who had written a couple of the puzzles."

> A GAMING EVOLUTION The Hobbit > King's Quest > Day Of The Tentacle



King's Quest took *The Hobbit*'s image-based adventure and added to it with animated movement and drawn scenes.



LucasArts popularised the 'point-and-click adventure'. It's unlikely we'll see real-time adventure games again as a result.





concept but suffered because of its inclusion. Many adored the images, finally being able to put visuals to what was typically a text-based, imagination-driven experience, while others criticised the lengthy time that it took to load each of the images. "I think it was something that added a lot to the game for people who were playing it more casually," suggests Megler, before agreeing that they were at least "cute pictures and they were very evocative."

The Hobbit, warts and all, would come to be released on ZX Spectrum in 1982, but by then Megler had already left the project. "I left quite a bit before *The Hobbit* actually made it onto the market," she says, admitting that she had grown tired by all the testing. "I worked there for one year and then by that time I was bored, frankly. Well, you spend a year writing assembler, the charm of the ideas had worn off at that time and there was a whole lot of testing work to do." With no industry to speak of, Megler left game development after only a year, with the majority of the design and programming on *The Hobbit* completed. She landed a job at IBM and moved into the corporate world, all the while the the game she had been a key developer on became something of a roaring success – at least for the time. It had sold over 100,000 copies during its first two years at retail, which might not seem like much now but was hugely impressive at the time. It's said to have then gone on to sell 500,000 copies, though with no figures to corroborate that it's impossible to know the truth.

In 1983 it won Best Strategy Game of the Year at the first ever Golden Joystick Awards, nominated alongside *Football Manager*, *Planet Invasion* and even *Scrabble*. With the years that followed, *The Hobbit* would build up a devoted following as players would absorb themselves in the game's complex and open-ended gameplay. But for Megler, it's success had been oblivious to her. "I actually didn't know it had become a hit," she admits. "I lost touch with those folk – you know, you go into the corporate world, it's such a different environment – I went off in my direction. A couple of times I remember going to parties and mentioning that I had written *The Hobbit* and people telling me that it was an absolutely awful game so I never brought it up again." It wasn't until the mid- to late-Nineties that Megler would actually discover how much of a phenomenon the game had been. The lack of the internet had kept the truth away from Megler and, after she was contacted by someone from a classic adventure website in Italy, she first discovered the truth of the matter. "He said he spent weeks tracking me down," she says, "and contacted me asking me for an interview because he wanted to feature an interview about the game on the classic game site. And that's when I first started discovery how successful it had become." As Megler would go on to find out, this brand new experience that *The Hobbit* had provided gave players something to truly absorb themselves in, rather than as a hobby or a way to pass the time as with other adventure games at the time. To the players of the era, it was a virtual world to explore and not simply text to read. It may have been buggy, it may have been slow, but to those that played the game it was a revelation. "It was very strange," says Megler of the moment she realised just how much of a success *The Hobbit* had been. "I had this same feeling that I've had over the years that I realised the huge impact it had on other people's lives, but it's had no impact on mine. It was a part-time job I had a university, you know – some people bag groceries, some people work in a bar, I did some coding. And it went off and took on a life on its own, and I get fanmail from people telling me it changed the course of their life, about how it caused them to learn to read. [For] one guy, it took him from reading Enid Blyton to reading *Lord Of The Rings*. People learnt English, people learnt the importance and value of relationships and interaction with other people from the game, which is just really scary when you think about it. And so it clearly had a huge impact, and for me it was just a part-time job at university. It is a very strange feeling."



■ Megler herself preferred to play the game without images to load.



■ The DOS version of the game had some of the better visuals of all the versions, understandable considering the extra power PCs had.

File Edit Move Action Special Picture

You are in Beorns house, a wide hall with a fireplace in the middle. The smoke from the fire rises to the blackened rafters in search of a way out through an opening in the roof.

■ *The Hobbit* was made available on a number of different systems from BBC Micro and C64 to the Apple II and Macintosh.



INTERVIEW

STEVE WOITA

Steve Woita began his development career at Apple, before moving on to Atari and latterly Sega. In this time he rubbed shoulders with Steve Jobs and Mark Cerny, and helped create a number of classic PC and console games including 1992's Kid Chameleon

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Taz (1983)
Creator and designer



Kid Chameleon (1992)
Designer and programmer



Sonic Spinball (1993)
Designer and programmer



YOU JOINED APPLE in the early Eighties. How did you get into games and what was the industry like back then?

After graduating from college, I got my first job at Apple Computer in 1980 and I worked on the Apple 2 line, debugging and fixing the motherboards after they came out of 'burn in'. They would send me the Apple 2 boards that failed the burn in and didn't work, [which was] thousands of them. Then I worked on the Lisa project as an engineering technician in the R&D group. I then went on to replace Daniel Kottke as the engineering technician on the Apple III with Dr Wendell Sanders, so that Dan could work with the Mac group. After the Apple III, I was then assigned to work with an amazing digital logic designer named Walt Broedner as his engineering technician on the Apple IIe and both of it's custom chips which were named Adam and Eve (IOU and MMU). My job was to take his designs and wire wrap and debug them until they both worked. I was also making sure that older hardware peripherals and software from the Apple II were compatible with the new Apple IIe.

Around that same time, Bill Budge of *Raster Blaster* fame walked into the lab and said to me, it would be really cool to get a *Crazy Climber* type of game going, but it would really need a pair of joysticks. I came up with a way to multiplex all of the inputs from two Atari type sticks. Another engineer named Keithen Hayenga was doing a four-paddle analog device and we figured we should do something with the two. We set up a meeting with Sirius Software and brought both of our prototype devices with us. We had a great time talking about the crazy Apple 2 game market. I believe Jerry Jewell, the president of Sirius Software, said 'I really like the four paddle and two Atari type stick devices – why don't we combine both into one device?'

KEITHEN AND I STOPPED OFF THE FREEWAY AND GOT PENCIL AND PAPER OUT AND DESIGNED ALL OF THE LOGIC TO WORK AS ONE DEVICE

On our drive back from the meeting with Sirius Software, Keithen and I stopped off the freeway at a rest stop and got pencil and paper out and designed all of the logic to work as one device. Sirius Software then named the device the 'Joyport'.

Keithen ended up programming a four-player foosball game that came with packaged with every Joyport. Not long after this, both Keithen and I wound up with interviews at Atari, and when I went for mine the first thing I saw and heard when I went through the glass doors at 275 Gibraltar Drive was the sound of a whip cracking. I heard it again and sure enough it was Howard Scott Warshaw walking around the corner dressed in a *Raiders Of*



STEVE ON EARLY GAME DESIGN EXPERIMENTATION WITH THE APPLE 2

"During my time at Apple I always viewed the Apple 2, and all of the other Apple machines, as really cool gaming machines. I would always find some time to experiment with graphic programming on the Apple 2 by moving objects on the hi-res screen in full 6502 assembly language and I knew at that point when I finally got stuff moving around on the screen I was totally hooked with the whole game-development process."

■ Like its name suggests, *Kid Chameleon* saw players switching between a number of in-game guises - each activated by specific headwear.

I WOULD SAY THERE WAS MORE PRESSURE TO DELIVER KID CHAMELEON IN THE SENSE THAT IT WAS NOT AN ESTABLISHED FRANCHISE

■ Woita worked on the Mega Drive version of Sonic the Hedgehog's pinball spin-off, *Sonic Spinball*, in the summer of 1993.

STEVE ON INTERVIEWING WITH MARK CERNY WEARING A BART SIMPSON T-SHIRT AND TENNIS CLOBBER

"■■■ When Mark Cerny called me, I'd just finished up playing tennis with Edward Rotberg and some other Atari Coin-op guys and I had my Bart Simpson t-shirt on that said 'Under Achiever' on it. Mark said, 'come on down and let me show you what we're doing here at Sega' and I said, 'well, I'm still in my tennis gear' and he said, 'no big deal, just come on down' and I said, 'okay'. I showed up in my tennis shorts wearing my Bart Simpson t-shirt and we talked for awhile, while he showed me what they were doing there and I really liked what I saw. He and I got along right away."

■ Like the majority of the 2600's games, 1983's *Taz* was primitive in its design yet sold well at the time.

The Lost Arc outfit. He was having fun staying in character while working on his game. The rest of my interview at Atari was more normal and they made me an offer, which I took. That's really how I got my start in the gaming industry. During my time at Apple the arcade was the place to go to see everything that was new in game technology and design. Most home games at that time were inspired or cloned from coin-op arcade games.

Did you ever meet Steve Jobs?

I did run into him a few times and I met him formally at, what we called at the time, VP lunches. You would sign up for these lunches a month or two in advance and it would consist of, in this case, Steve Jobs and about five or six of us in a very small conference room, and I asked him questions and I think that's the first time I officially met him. I'd see him in the Apple 2 Research and Development lab while I was working on the Apple IIe and I remember Steve walking down through the lab one time carrying a giant video board for the PC (our competitor) and he was making a bunch of jokes about how big the board was and how many chips were on it. That was a funny moment.

Working on *Sonic 2* must have come with a distinct degree of pressure given the success of the original *Sonic*, however *Kid Chameleon* was an entirely new series altogether. There was arguably more pressure for *KC* to deliver.

I worked on *Sonic 2* for less than a month. I had some ideas of how to possibly handle how the bonus round could be done technically and some of the team members thought that was helpful; I wasn't the programmer that actually implemented the bonus round, but the *Sonic* guys let me lay out some of the rings in some of the bonus rounds, so that was fun.

I would say there was a more pressure to deliver *Kid Chameleon* in the sense that it was not an established franchise. *Sonic* was an amazing franchise and don't get me wrong, there were high expectations for *Sonic 2*, but *KC* was a new title coming out of our group and it had to deliver.

At the time, there were an abundance of platforms game on the console market - what were the main things you had to consider in order to keep things fresh?

I think the huge difference in our game was being able to change the main player into so many different characters that had so many special attributes and really gave our game a lot of interesting replay value because you could try out the same level with different helmets (characters) and then decide what helmet type works for certain situations. I really liked the idea of switching character type by just simply touching a new helmet and I wished I came up with that idea, but somebody else on the team came up with that gem.



Our biggest challenge was making sure that we could get the whole game done and tested with all of these crazy helmet types working for every situation that the player could be in. Getting the code off in time for ROM production and that it would be completely ready for shipping for that Christmas too. Fortunately we made that deadline!

What was most enjoyable part of working on *Kid Chameleon*?

Designing and programming the bosses and some of the little crazy monsters in the game. The other part of the game that I had fun programming was the particle and special effects on the blocks or tiles that *KC* would interact with. When you jump and mash into a breakable tile or block, I'd have shards fly off, or when you landed on a rubber tile or block you'd be able to get a good bounce going, those types of things. All of the effects when you pick up something like a clock or a diamond that would fly off up to the HUD. Mark worked on some of the effects too.

***Kid Chameleon* was a long game with no save function – was it always intended to be so big or did it grow in scope over time?**

Yeah, the game was very long. I don't think anyone of us set out to make the game as big as it turned out, but all of the designers on the team had so many fun levels to play that we didn't want to throw out any fun playing levels, so the game just grew. We all talked of having a battery backup save feature and I personally didn't want to have a battery in the cartridge because I knew after about five or so years, that battery would be dead and serve no function and add cost to the game, so I pushed hard to not have the battery and figured players could just leave the game on to finish it. I know, we could've made a save game state password code mechanism for saving level and profile state, but I think to add the UI screens for the password entry codes and the necessary 68000 code to do the logic would've extended the release time of the game and we kind of all liked that fact that you just had to play the game through in a sitting or leave the game on and come back and finish it.

Upon release, *Kid Chameleon* was a commercial and critical success. What was the feeling like in the studio at the time?

The feeling that *Kid Chameleon* team had about the game during development was that the game always felt interesting and fun to play even as we were programming, designing, developing and tuning the rounds and the game as a whole. Most of us were very heavy game players and were very critical of our own work and we all played the game constantly, and we really always enjoyed playing the game. When we finished the game and the ROMs were going to production for that Christmas session, I wanted us to immediately start the sequel to *Kid Chameleon* even before we shipped the first one. We had all of our tools worked out and we all really had a lot of fun on the first one and I figured let's do another, but that sequel didn't happen and it should've.

In the age of crowdfunding, would *Kid Chameleon* remake/reboot be something you'd ever consider?

Well I would if I could get most of the actual team together that made the first one and that may be hard to do. It really is about how the whole team worked together, kind of like a band. The main guy behind *Kid Chameleon* who headed up STI in the first place was Mark Cerny, who has been doing a lot of work for Sony lately (designer of the PS4) and a lot of the members of the team are all over the place at different companies, but it could be possible – who knows?

As an Easter Egg, you can play *Maniac Mansion* in its entirety in it's 1993 sequel *Day Of The Tentacle* and its 2015 remaster.

GAME CHANGERS

MANIAC MANSION

Released: 5 October 1987 **Publisher:** Lucasfilm Games **Developer:** In-house **System:** Commodore 64, Apple II

Three decades from its release and this game-changing adventure game is still as potent today as it was in 1987. Marking the debut of Ron Gilbert and Gary Winnick as a creative force, it still stands as one of the most important games ever made

MANIAC MANSION may not have been *the first* adventure game to grace videogaming, but it was arguably the first adventure game that was actually *playable*. Conceived in 1985 by up-and-coming Lucasfilm Games designers Ron Gilbert and Gary Winnick, *Maniac Mansion* was the answer to a problem many developers refused to acknowledge the existence of: that for all of their creativity and potential, many adventure games were simply more frustrating than they were fun to play. In essence, *Maniac Mansion* became the direct antithesis to every other genre game of the era.

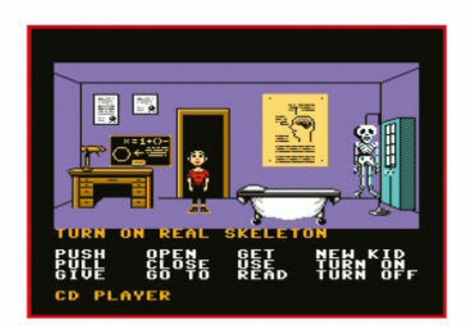
Adventure games were, of course, popularised by Sierra On-Line, a studio that found a great deal of success through the likes of *Mystery House* [1980, as On-Line Systems] and *King's Quest* [1984]. These releases became legendary for their malicious design philosophy that gave no quarter, regardless of how obtuse the objective, puzzle, or eventual solution. Gilbert and Winnick pushed to bring accessibility to the genre, creating a new status quo where players wouldn't be punished for their curiosity or creativity.

It's often Gilbert's second stint in the director's seat, with *The Secret Of Monkey Island*, or *Maniac Mansion*'s 1993 sequel, *Day Of The Tentacle*, that tend to be revered by fans to this day, though we wouldn't have either without the work that was completed 30 years ago on this 1987 game-changer.

It was born of a wild creative spirit, embracing the inherent insanity and popularity of teen slasher flicks and B-movie horror clichés to create a tone and setting that worked on multiple levels. It was charming and genuine, brimming with personality; humour ran through all of its uniquely-engaging scenarios and puzzles, making the game as fun to experience as a third-party viewer as it was to actually be in command of the pointing and clicking.

PATCHWORK PORT

THE WEIRD CHANGES MADE TO THE NES VERSION OF MANIAC MANSION



CENSORSHIP

★ Back in 1987, Nintendo prohibited any 'depictions of excessive and gratuitous violence' nor any 'sexually suggestive or explicit content' on the NES. That meant many changes had to be made to the dialogue and some basic puzzle designs.



NES SCUM(M)

★ *Maniac Mansion's* credits mentions '*NES SCUMM*', the alternate version of the engine created to run on the Nintendo hardware. It was later removed, as Nintendo was worried players would mistake this to mean Lucasfilm was calling NES players scum.



THAT HAMSTER

★ And yet, in spite of all of the restrictions to get the game released on NES, Nintendo never picked up on *that* encounter with a hamster. You know, where you order Sid or Razor to put a live hamster in a microwave and, oh, *blow it up* – strange world, eh?

Maniac Mansion created the template for the modern adventure game, sweeping it away from niche interest and kickstarted a surge of popularity for the genre.

It's important to note that, whilst far more accessible than anything that had come before it, *Maniac Mansion* was still a challenge. Hugely innovative and intuitive puzzle design kept players guessing, though never would you find yourself hours down the line without a mission critical item – that was one element of Sierra's games that Gilbert was quick to kill off entirely.

Another challenge for the player? Finding the will to stay on track. The mansion itself was a character, with every room seemingly offering up small details to help build the world out around its three playable characters. There were distractions aplenty, with players pushed to explore, to let their curiosity guide them, getting more out of the game the harder they pushed back against its design. Cutscenes, a revolution back in 1987, were used to give players a sense of where the story was heading and any vital clues they may have missed along the way – a hugely innovative idea that has become one of the industries most abused directorial devices.

■■■ And yet, *Maniac Mansion*'s true legacy isn't that of its wildly ambitious design, refreshing narrative structure or quirky humour and writing; nor was it that all-important introduction of cutscenes, Winnick's instantly-recognisable art style, the multiple endings or the smart way in which the game handled player death – *Maniac Mansion*'s greatest legacy is that of the *SCUMM* engine. Gilbert's solution to *King's Quest's* impossible-to-follow text parser and frustrating player deaths was the *Script Creation Utility For Maniac Mansion* – or, *SCUMM*, as it's known today.

Coded in just a year by Gilbert, the engine drew heavily from Sierra's own *AGI* engine (and even ICOM's MacVenture interface), but it was Gilbert's smart appropriation of the vital parts that made it such an endearing success. The engine would be used to power no less than 13 original games over the decade that would follow, with the intuitive placement of all verbs and inventory items at the bottom of the screen becoming a genre staple.

Maniac Mansion is too often forgotten by the masses, replaced in the hearts and minds by other point-and-click adventure games like *The Secret Of Monkey Island*, *Grim Fandango* and *Zak McKracken And The Alien Mindbenders*. But this was the beginning of it all, revolutionising the genre to provide a platform for those other experiences to build from.

Adventure games became accessible, experiences led by smart narrative and puzzle designs – built upon a foundation of gentle trial and error, genuinely funny interactions and smart twisting of gaming conventions. It freed players from the guessing-game antics and kill-state situations that had long plagued its predecessors, leaning on an elegant and inherently intuitive model to guide the experience forward.

Maniac Mansion is a landmark, launching the careers of some of gaming's most prolific creators and putting its studio into a position of dominance as the Nineties approached. For its intricate level design, laser-sharp wit and infallible logic, *Maniac Mansion* is just the most important adventure game ever made; it's a classic whose impact cannot be overstated.

MANIAC MANSION IS A LANDMARK TITLE, KICKSTARTING THE CAREERS OF SOME OF GAMING'S MOST PROLIFIC CREATORS

KEY FACTS

- *Maniac Mansion* was a breakthrough hit for Lucasfilm Games. Its critical and commercial success encouraged the publisher to push more adventure games into active development, ensuring the creation of some of the Nineties most loved hits.

- The *SCUMM – Script Creation Utility For Maniac Mansion* – engine was coded by Ron Gilbert, and became the engine of choice for Lucasfilm titles for the decade that would follow.

GAME CHANGERS

EIGHT CLASSIC POINT-AND-CLICK ADVENTURE GAMES

EIGHT CLASSIC POINT-AND-CLICK ADVENTURE GAMES



GRIM FANDANGO

■ In many respects, *Grim Fandango* should never have worked. Not only was it the first adventure game from LucasArts to use 3D graphics overlaid across static prerendered backgrounds, but it was also a strange blend of ideas – mixing film noir staples and a Day Of The Dead aesthetic. *Grim Fandango* was both an overwhelming success and a colossal failure; despite being one of the most critically-acclaimed games of the Nineties, it was a commercial failure that pushed LucasArts to terminate its involvement in the genre.



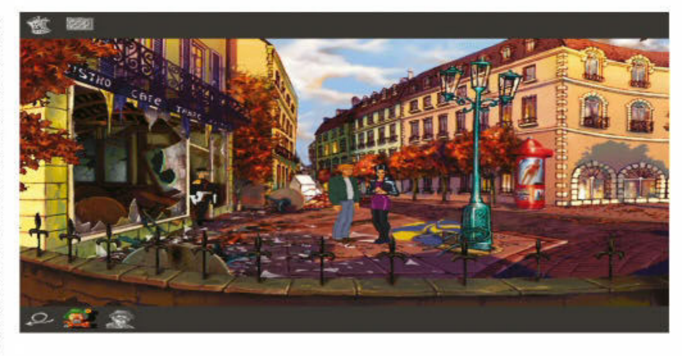
MANIAC MANSION II: DAY OF THE TENTACLE

■ When *Day Of The Tentacle* released in 1993 it set a benchmark of quality for the genre. It has a near-perfect blend of comedy and character, of puzzling perfection and personality. *DOTT* is a time-bending adventure that encapsulated everything that made these games so enjoyable to begin with. Just as *Maniac Mansion* made Ron Gilbert and Gary Winnick so legendary, *DOTT* would do the same for Dave Grossman and Tim Schafer, who would go on to be prolific creators for Telltale and Double Fine respectively.



LEISURE SUIT LARRY: LOVE FOR SAIL!

■ Look, we know what you're thinking and, no, we aren't smut lords – we just like to celebrate good gaming! *Leisure Suit Larry* got himself one hell of bad reputation over the years, but when it comes to *Love For Sail* it's worth overlooking for a few hours of pleasure. Legitimately funny, (relatively) sex-positive and well designed, *Love For Sail* is a rare example of Sierra On-line showing that it has the capacity to develop adventure games that don't require a masochistic penchant for punishment to enjoy.



BROKEN SWORD: THE SHADOW OF THE TEMPLARS

■ One of the most visually-stunning adventure games ever released, *Broken Sword: The Shadow Of The Templars* might just be the best adventure game that *wasn't* created by LucasArts. While it can be punishing, it also features masterful puzzle design, with its logic rooted in the real world. Still, it's influence is far reaching, with many believing (including director Charles Cecil) that *The Shadow Of The Templars* was the primary influence behind Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*. If that's true – and trust us on this one – *Broken Sword* is *much* better.





THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND

■ It's difficult to pinpoint what it is that made Ron Gilbert's *Maniac Mansion* follow-up so successful, but there's a potent mixture of humour, expertise and spirit to *The Secret Of Monkey Island* that just, well, *works*. While the sequel is arguably better, the first is cleverer. It inspires childlike wonder when exploring its world, from the larger-than-life characters to its intricately-bizarre puzzle designs. If *Maniac Mansion* set the template for the modern adventure game, it was *Monkey Island* that set the benchmark for style and substance. Besides, who isn't partial to a little sword-battling banter?



INDIANA JONES AND THE FATE OF ATLANTIS

■ The best *Indiana Jones* film never to hit the big screen, LucasArts' 1992 adventure stands as one of the best licensed games ever released. This adventure sees Indy heading off in search of the legendary sunken city of Atlantis alongside archaeologist-turned-psychic, Sophia Hapgood. With three paths to select – lovingly known as the Team, Wits, Fists system – which gave way to an adaptable story structure and a dose of reply value, *The Fate Of Atlantis* is a welcome alternative to *Crystal Skull*.



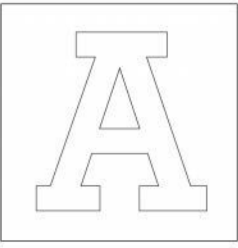
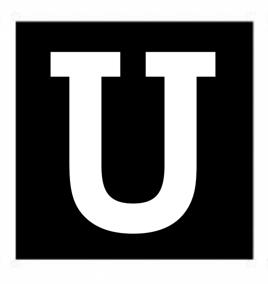
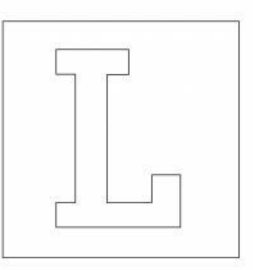
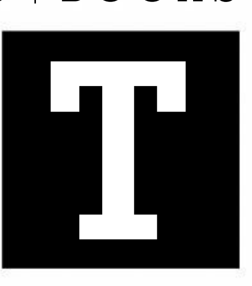
ZAK MCKRACKEN AND THE ALIEN MINDBENDERS

■ A smaller, more intimate affair, *Zak McKracken And the Alien Mindbenders* never quite reached the heights of *Maniac Mansion* – but it became a classic all the same. Like many other LucasArts games of the era, it uses puzzles and humour to propel its story, but it's the introduction of intricate mazes and its movie set feel that brought Zak's wayward adventure to life. Director David Fox, famed for his collaboration with Ron Gilbert and Gary Winnick, would return to the adventure games 2017 to work on *Thimbleweed Park*.



BENEATH A STEEL SKY

■ An oft-overlooked gem of the genre, *Beneath A Steel Sky* swaps out fantasy for science fiction in this somewhat darker tale. Designed by Charles Cecil, of *Broken Sword* fame, *Beneath A Steel Sky* found a middle ground between the punishing puzzles of Sierra and the slapstick comedy of LucasArts. The result is a game full of logical but testing challenges; a serious and satirical story cut with beautifully witty dialogue, all alongside one of the most intuitive UI and control schemes to feature in the genre. Once it gets going, you'll be hard-pressed to find an adventure as enthralling or compelling.

THE 

RAZER BLADE PRO

MANUFACTURER: **RAZER** PRICE: **£3,499**

WE KNOW WHAT you're thinking… you're looking at that price tag up there and almost skipping straight over this section entirely to look at the Pac-Man lamp. Well hold your flipping horses, because this might just be the best gaming laptop ever made. The Pro is the big sibling of Razer's more affordable Blade, and there's a good reason for that frankly astronomical price – it gives users what can genuinely be called a desktop-level gaming experience in a laptop.

Nvidia GeForce GTX 1080 graphics with 8GB of GDDR5X VRAM. An Intel quad-core i7 processor. An insane 32GB of RAM. All of this is condensed into an incredible aluminium body that still only manages to be 2.3cm thick. Add to all that the Thunderbolt USB-C port, which allows for insanely fast data transfer, and you've got a serious machine.

But that's not all – you'll also find a 17.3-inch, 4K touchscreen to ensure your games look their very best when you push up the settings. And, more excitingly, the keyboard that sits below it is fully mechanical. And that doesn't mean huge keys sticking up from the body, either – these low-profile keys look like any other laptop's, but feel fantastic. And, because it's Razer, they also light up, which is obviously awesome. If you're serious about gaming on the go, there really isn't a better option right now… as long as you have deep pockets.

www.razerzone.co.uk

VERDICT 9/10



This 4K screens offers one of the best portable gaming experiences money can buy. Albeit it's a good chunk of money in this instance.

The mechanical keyboard offers the best compromise of low profile and precision input that you could ask for. A real step forward.



PAC-MAN LAMP

If you already have the Pac-Man ghost lamp, why not give them something to run from with this? The soft, yellow glow will relax you, while the dimmer switch and 12 game-related sound effects will make you squeal with joy.

www.firebox.com



PIKACHU CAKE MOULD

Pikachu is so cute you could just eat him up, and now you don't have to feel guilty about doing so. This cake mould isn't just for cakes, though. Jelly? Sure! Sand castles? Why not?

www.thinkgeek.com



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Are you playing *Breath Of The Wild*? If not, but you intend to, buying this T-shirt might help you prepare for what will be one of the best adventures you ever take.
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CONTINUE FIGHTING

We aren't sure if this hoodie is specifically a gaming reference, or perhaps refers to the wider political landscape in an era of protests. Probably just the gaming thing, to be honest.
www.threadless.com



PIKACHU SAFFIANO VEGAN LEATHER BACKPACK

What better way to carry your 3DS, Switch, Pokédex or collection of Poké Balls than in this nifty bag? It features the adorable Pikachu, and has four sections in which to throw all of your stuff.
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ANKER POWERCORE 20100

SOLD BY: **ANKER** PRICE: **£28.99**

THE SWITCH'S BATTERY life isn't anything to write home about, and if you're taking a longer trip you'll probably want to consider a charging solution that will keep you playing for longer. Anker's PowerCore has an impressive 20,100mAh battery (for reference, this would fully recharge 9.7-inch iPad Pro more than two and a half times), which should give you plenty of life for a long flight. You will also need to invest in a USB-A to USB-C cable, though.
www.amazon.com





SAMSUNG 128GB EVO MICRO SD CARD

SOLD BY: **SAMSUNG** PRICE: **£45.00**

THE SWITCH ONLY offers 32GB of onboard memory, and if you load it up with a few digital titles that will fill up fast. Thankfully, the microSD slot means you can expand the storage, and this card is one great way to do it. The 128GB card is affordable, and offers a fair amount of extra space – the Switch supports cards up to 2TB, but currently anything more than 128GB really breaks the bank. The 48MB-a-second write speed should keep the save times to a minimum, too.
www.amazon.com



For a little elevation and some more options in terms of viewing angles, a stand like this means that hunching over the Switch screen on the move won't be as uncomfortable as it could be otherwise.

HORI PLAYSTAND

SOLD BY: **HORI** PRICE: **£9.99**

THE SWITCH IS really adaptable, with all kinds of playstyles possible thanks to the detachable controllers and kickstand. However, the console's kickstand isn't all that adjustable, and you can't charge the Switch while you use it. Hori's Playstand neatly avoids both of these issues by raising the tablet up and offering three viewing angles. The stand itself is fairly large, but folds neatly away to be smaller than the Switch itself. For those that will be playing on the move a lot, this is a great solution.
www.amazon.com



THE UNOFFICIAL NES/FAMICOM: A VISUAL COMPENDIUM

PUBLISHER: **BITMAP BOOKS**



WITH THE NES Mini going on-sale worldwide towards the end of 2016 (and harder to find than the final god-damned eagle feathers in *Assassin's Creed II*), the retro console is enjoying a resurgence in popularity. This is perhaps why the Kickstarter campaign for this unofficial compendium blew it's £25,000 goal out of the water, with fans pledging over £190,000.

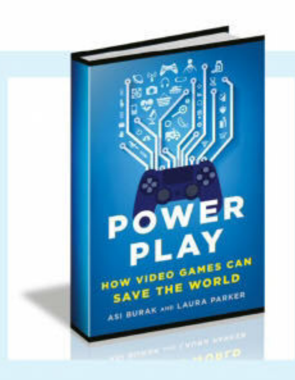
We can understand it, too. The book really is beautiful, from every angle. It sits inside a sleeve that features some of the NES's best sprites. It's lenticular, too, so moving the book left and right animates them – it's a great touch that really makes the book feel special.

Inside, you'll find over 170 classic games explored across double-page spreads, each one featuring a blown-up screenshot and details about the game. The classics are all present and correct, of course, but there are some smaller titles that you might not have heard of mixed in there as well. The book also showcases the very best box art for the system, from the black box games like *Duck Hunt* and *Metroid*, to more extravagantly-designed boxes like *Castlevania* and *Double Dragon*.

What really helps it stand out, though, is the inclusion of interviews with key industry figures, and mini-features that explore some genuinely interesting subjects. Whether it's the fan art that the console and its games inspired, or the games that never got a final release on the system, you'll find plenty to keep you interested. This might be the ultimate coffee-table book for NES fans, which is high praise – because there are a fair number around right now.

www.bitmapbooks.co.uk





POWER PLAY: HOW VIDEO GAMES CAN SAVE THE WORLD

We all know that games can be a force for good, despite others would have you believe. This book focuses on the social good that games can do, as well as looking at what the next-generation of games might be like.

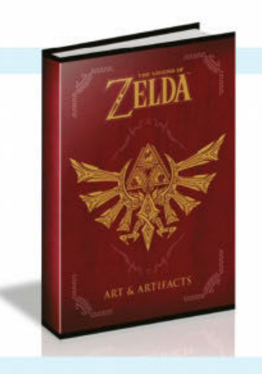
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There's never been a better time to learn more about the *Mass Effect* universe. This canonical story from *ME*'s creative director, Mac Walters, runs parallel to the original trilogy, and contains all 13 issues of the *Blasto: Eternity Is Forever* series.

www.darkhorse.com



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: ART & ARTIFACTS

What better way to celebrate the release of a new *Zelda* game than with an art book celebrating the incredible series? This book includes rare promotional material, artwork, and illustrations for every game, from the NES titles right up to *BOTW*.

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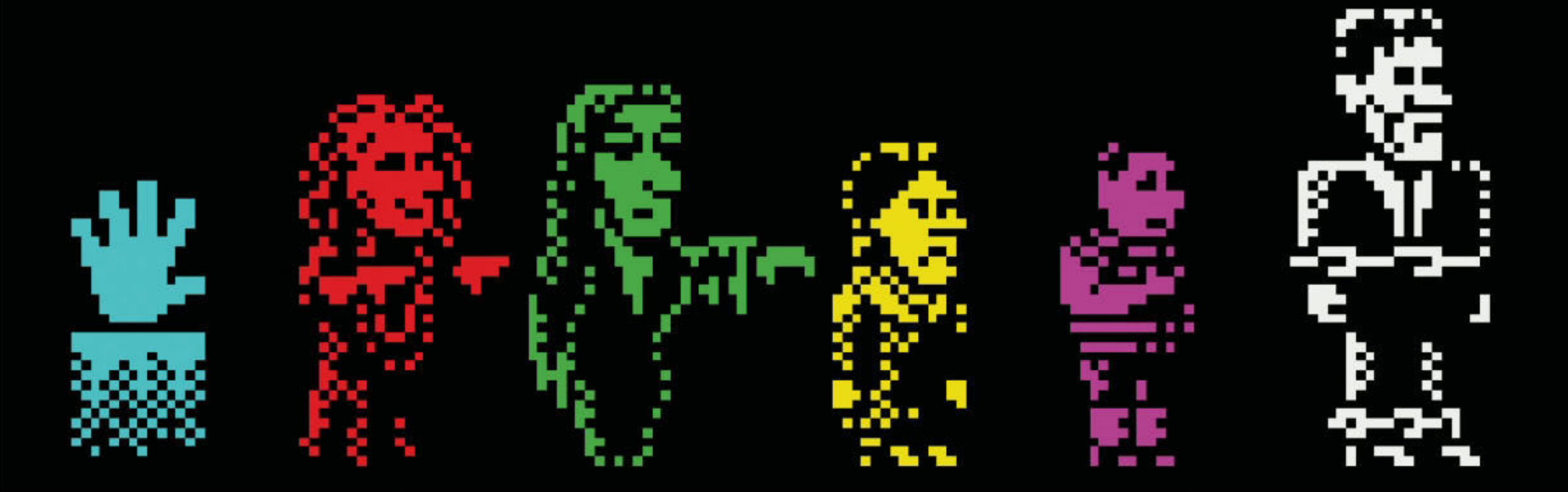
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